Splatter Movies

by John McCarty

Splatter Movies

Breaking the Last Taboo

A critical survey of the wildly demented sub-genre of the horror film that is changing the face of film realism forever.

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by John McCarty

FantaCo Enterprises, Inc.

Other books by John McCarty:
You're on Open Line: Inside the Wacky World of Late-Night Talk Radio

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FOR MY DAD,
whose influence shines
through this book.

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What is a Splatter Movie?

Chapter I

Théâtre du Grand Guignol

Toward the close of Sean Cunningham's highly successful 1980 movie about a knife-wielding psycho who's got it in for the entire staff and management of a New Jersey summer camp, *Friday the 13th*, the heroine (Adrienne King) finds herself locked in a prolonged struggle for her life with this selfsame psycho. During the fight, the killer's knife (actually more of a machete) gets dropped. Our heroine scoops it up, and, as the psycho charges her in a final burst of murderous lust, she swings the blade wildly and in one clean stroke lops off the baddie's head.

Now ordinarily, such a scene would be just another example of that tired old cinematic standby, Gratuitous Violence. But what lifts it out of the ordinary and moves it onto an increasingly more vital plane of cinematic endeavor is the gleeful realism with which this beheading is staged: in delicious close-up (and slow motion besides) so that we are able to see every minute blood-spurting, bony, sinewy, muscle-exposing detail. *Friday the 13th*, you see, is a *splatter movie*.

Splatter movies, off-shoots of the horror film genre, aim not to scare their audiences, necessarily, nor to drive them to the edge of their seats in suspense, but to *mortify* them with scenes of explicit gore. In splatter movies, mutilation is indeed the message—many times the only one.

Splatter movies have their source in *Grand Guignol*, French theatre created initially in the late 1800s for the benefit of those with jaded tastes, but which later gravitated toward a more unsophisticated audience, the French theatre-going masses, for those who wished solely to marvel at grotesquely realistic eye-gougings, beheadings, and throat slittings. Plots were openly derivative or nonexistent, but nobody cared: in *Grand Guignol*, gore, not drama, was the thing. It was like a ghoulish magic show. The "ooohhing" and "ahhhing" audience went only to wonder how in hell all those gruesome tricks were accomplished right before its eyes.

Splatter movies have a lot of the same appeal. They steal plots from anywhere; after all, a plot is only a method of getting from one gory episode to the next. *Friday the 13th* brazenly swipes from John Carpenter's equally derivative *Halloween* (1979), Brian De Palma's Hitchcockian *Carrie* (1976), and a host of others. Even *Friday*'s score, by Harry Manfredini, is lifted from Bernard Herrmann's score for *Psycho* (1960), but without half the orchestra. Director Cunningham's previous splatter movie, *Last House on the Left* (1971), which was written by Cunningham but directed by another splatter movie mogul, Wes Craven, borrowed its plot from no less a source than Ingmar Bergman's classic *The Virgin Spring* (1960).

In their pursuit of perfect gore, splatter movies also dispense with any kind of plausibility, and minor details in particular are seldom even considered. In *Halloween*, for example, which is supposed to be set in Illinois, a number of cars sport California license plates. But again, splatter movies are not concerned with logic or consistency. Their aim, primarily, is to astonish us with the perfection of their effects. The pace of these films is almost always pell-mell, high-energy film-making at its most furious. And the best of them can be quite amusing indeed if one experiences them on their own terms.

As a pure splatter movie, *Friday the 13th* is neither one of the best nor one of the worst. Characteristically illogical and completely empty-headed, it only wants to terrify us with its grisly special effects (created by Tom Savini). Yet even in that aim it is only marginally successful. The truly skillful splatter movie seldom uses close-ups during its shock sequences. Effects are usually held in medium shot (and without editing) so as to make the audience wonder, á la *Grand Guignol*, how in hell the scene was accomplished without killing off the actor or actors involved. But *Friday the 13th* does cheat. It uses close-ups (as in the previously described beheading scene) and cuts away at specific moments of impact, returning moments later to reveal the grisly aftermath. Cunningham obviously chickened out. Still, his film is low budget, it is totally lighthearted in its approach to its gore, and it doesn't have a dull moment in it—all of which qualify it as a full-

French Cultural Services

A typical moment of on-stage mayhem from a live performance at the *Théâtre du Grand Guignol* in Paris—the place where splatter was born.

The Revenge of Frankenstein

© Hammer Films

The villainous Baron von Frankenstein (Peter Cushing) gets a splattery comeuppance in the second of Hammer's influential and very successful series of Frankenstein films.

fledged splatter movie, and the first of its type to have been picked up for distribution by a major studio, Paramount. It would appear that this trend is here to stay.

The godfather of the genre is Chicago-based filmmaker Herschell Gordon Lewis, who began turning out his first stomach-churning little quickies (*A Taste of Blood, Blood Feast, 2000 Maniacs*) back in the early sixties at about the same time that another influence on the genre, England's Hammer Film Productions, was coming into its own.

Lewis discovered that his first love, the skin flick, was being absorbed by mainstream moviemakers. As Hollywood started exposing more flesh in its own films, Lewis realized that if he was going to stay in business, he had better carve out (literally) some new territory. The provisions of the Motion Picture Production Code established in the early thirties had been whittled down over the years to now allow just about everything to be shown on the screen. Only one taboo remained to be shattered: scenes of explicit gore. Pointedly calling his product "gore films," Lewis started his cameras rolling. Stakes were driven through human heads, tongues were ripped out of girls's mouths—all in medium shot and without editing—to keep his audiences agape. Unfortunately (for him anyway), those audiences consisted mainly of the drive-in crowd, concentrated mostly in the South, and so Lewis's reputation did not spread the way he'd hoped. Most of his work has not been seen by the vast majority of filmgoers in this country.

The first official splatter movie to gain a real reputation was George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*. Made near Pittsburgh in 1968 for a paltry sum, it has since grossed millions of dollars, mostly because of repeated late-night showings at second run houses all across the country. Romero's film, about flesh-eating zombies, paved the way for Cunningham and Craven's *Last House on the Left*, Craven's *The Hills Have Eyes*, the very *Guignol* films of Canada's David Cronenberg (*They Came from Within, Rabid, The Brood, Scanners*) and dozens of others, including Romero's recent *Dawn of the Dead*, a sequel to *Night of the Living Dead*. For *Dawn*, Romero himself coined the term "splatter cinema;" it is probably the most fantastically grisly film ever made. It boasts some astonishing effects (created by Tom Savini): for example, a beheading by helicopter blade and a screwdriver being driven through a zombie's head, each of which is filmed in a continuous take to make us gasp all the more.

Romero's films, however, have an underlying layer of social satire which the films of most of his peers lack. In *Dawn of the Dead*, zombies, returning to life, head for a modern shopping center, and in one amusing sequence stumble up and down escalators, amble through stores, and, to the accompaniment of canned music, sit quietly on benches, their faces a total blank. They look very much like typical Saturday afternoon shoppers at your average suburban shopping mall.

Because of the commercial success of so many of these low-budget, independently made efforts, Hollywood couldn't, of course, ignore the splatter movie phenomenon for long. And so, in 1974, it released its own. Despite its pretensions to being about the "mysteries of faith," William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* was little more than a very posh splatter movie, utilizing every trick in the book to pulverize audiences into a single gagging mass. "How did they *do* that?" We all asked as we peeked between our fingers. *The Exorcist* went on to become one of the five top-grossing films in the history of motion pictures, paving the way for other major budget splatter epics like *The Omen* and many more.

The pages that follow offer the first comprehensive look ever taken at this wildly demented sub-genre of the horror film—its roots and rewards, its artists and its exploiters, its successes and its failures, its impact on film censorship, and its possible meaning to an age filled with almost as many gross absurdities as the products of the genre itself.

For good or for ill, splatter movies are indeed having an inalterable effect on contemporary cinema. By breaking the last taboo of the screen, they are changing the definition of realism in the movies forever. For that reason alone, perhaps, we should pay them heed.

Blood Feast

Courtesy *Cinefantastique*

"Nothing in the annals of horror quite like it!" The ads proclaimed. And in this case, they were right.

Night of the Living Dead

© Continental/Courtesy *Cinefantastique*

The dead begin to rise in George A. Romero's watershed *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), the film which introduced his EC horror comics approach to splatter.

Mark of the Devil Part Two

Dawn of the Dead

This zombie apparently has his own ideas about gun control.

Courtesy Hollywood Book and Poster

Torture ruled the day in Hallmark's *Mark of the Devil Part Two* (1974), the sequel to the same company's very successful splatter import of 1972. Both films bore a gratuitously self-imposed non-rating of "V for Violence." And as if that wasn't outrageously offensive enough, vomit bags were issued to patrons as a publicity gimmick.

© New Line Cinema

Leatherface (Gunnar Hanson), the junior member of a family of four cannibal-killers, goes on the rampage.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre

The Hills Have Eyes

© The Blood Relations Company/Courtesy: Hollywood Book and Poster

The hills are alive with a family of crazed killers and deadly snakes in Wes Craven's second splatter movie, *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977).

The Brood

© New World Pictures

A very flimsy door is the only barrier between a terrified Candy (Cindy Hinds) and *The Brood* in David Cronenberg's *Guignol* shocker.

Halloween

© Compass International Pictures

The Shape (Nick Castle) attacks virginal teenager Jamie Lee Curtis in John Carpenter's empty-headed but enjoyable low budget thrillshow, *Halloween* (1979).

Grand Guignol
The Roots of Splatter

Chapter II

Back in 1959 when I was 15 years old, I read an article in *Time* magazine about an unusual theatre in Paris that catered to audiences with some very specific tastes. It was called the *Théâtre du Grand Guignol*, and it had been established in 1899 by a French impresario named Max Maurey.

I'd never heard of either Maurey or his *Théâtre*, though the term *Grand Guignol* was quite familiar to me as it was usually applied in a derogatory sense to any kind of fiction I'd had a special fondness for at the time, from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to Gaston Leroux's *Phantom of the Opera*.

The offerings of the *Théâtre du Grand Guignol* were not a great deal different in subject matter from works of horror like *Frankenstein*, but in terms of their treatment of that subject matter, they were vastly different, and this is what caught my interest. *Grand Guignol* did not deal in horror per se, though horror was very often a byproduct; it dealt instead in *astonishment*. *Grand Guignol's* audiences in the fifties consisted mainly of working class types, the less well educated (groundlings as they were called in Shakespeare's time), who attended, according to the article, not for any cultural upliftment, but to marvel at the ultra-realistic effects performed right before their eyes by the actors on stage. The fact that these effects were tied always to scenes of explicit gore—that they were gruesome or sickening—did not seem to matter as much as the fact that they were mind-boggling in their execution. The kick to be gotten was not from the deed portrayed, but from the overpowering effect of the trick itself. Here the medium alone was the message; the illusion was all.

The *Théâtre du Grand Guignol* flourished for over sixty years. It closed its doors only recently when it found that its audiences had gradually been usurped by the power of the movies. Today, splatter movies have completely taken the place *Grand Guignol* once held as *the* source of bloodily amazing illusions for those in search of a quick astonishment fix.

The term *Guignol* is derived from the name of a marionette created by French puppet master Laurent Mourquette (1744-1844). What distinguished this puppet from his more celebrated city cousins, *Punch and Judy*, were his rough, peasant-like facial features and his earthy, peasant humor. *Punch and Judy*'s routines appealed more to urban tastes.

All puppet shows at the time, however, had one thing in common: they were brutal, their skits laced equally with knockabout farce, violence and an overall heartlessness of tone. Revenge was a particularly oft-used theme.

When cabarets offering live-action versions of the more horrific elements of the *Punch and Judy/Guignol* shows began to crop up in Paris, the name apparently carried over. Max Maurey later centralized all of these cabaret routines under one roof, calling his the theatre of *"Grand" Guignol*.

Maurey's theatre specialized in short plays of violence, murder, rape, the supernatural, and suicide. Many of them were adaptations of the stories of Edgar Allen Poe, written by a now forgotten dramatist named Oscar Meteniér. Poe's *Murders in the Rue Morgue* and *The Tell-Tale Heart* were particular favorites, as were originals like *L'Experiment Horrible*, the title of which probably explains all.

Subtlety, psychology, love interest, all were sacrificed in these short dramas to the shock effect and the prevailing themes of pain and terror. While at first Maurey's plays drew an audience composed of people with an over-sophisticated and decadent taste, their appeal later shifted to the common folk, visitors to the big city who were out for a break in the humdrum pattern of their lives, and their appeal even now in the form of splatter movies has stayed with this group pretty much exclusively ever since.

In a more subdued, less grisly form, *Grand Guignol* crossed the Channel in 1908 to make its first appearance in England, where it quickly became a staple of the English speaking stage. British *Grand Guignol* never reached the intensity of the French presentations, however. For one thing, censorship of the arts was stronger in Britain. And so British *Grand Guignol* emphasized instead the Gothic elements implicit in the genre, characterized by adaptations of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *Dracula*.

Later efforts such as *Angel Street* (subsequently filmed as *Gaslight*

Théâtre du Grand Guignol

Gregory R. Montgomery

Splatter's roots.

[1944] with Charles Boyer and Ingrid Bergman) and Mary Hayley Bell's *Duet for Two Hands*, about a concert pianist who loses his hands in an accident then mistakenly has the hands of a murderer grafted onto him with appropriately *Guignol* results, came to typify the English approach to the genre, an approach which later found its way onto cinema screens and into the consciousness of filmgoers everywhere when Hammer Film Productions released its first and vastly influential foray into *Grand Guignol*, *The Curse of Frankenstein*, in 1957.

The Curse of Frankenstein was *Grand Guignol* in the gruesome French style, but it also carried on the English Gothic tradition as well, emphasizing period atmosphere and costuming, castles and psychodrama. *Curse*'s characters were not simply puppets brought on screen solely for the grisly kill—the gore films of Herschell Gordon Lewis would soon reinstitute that tradition. Hammer's early efforts, beginning with *The Curse of Frankenstein*, were literally a wedding (in red, shall we say?) of both French and English *Grand Guignol* styles.

As influential as Hammer's films were to become to this budding screen genre, however, they were not the first to portray realistic, gory effects on-screen for the purpose of astonishing audiences. On the contrary, gory effects had popped up in the movies as far back as 1916.

And that was when trouble with the censors began.

Théâtre du Grand Guignol

French Cultural Services

Grand Guignol's prevailing themes of pain and terror are very much in evidence in these two scenes from typical horror plays of the *Théâtre du Grand Guignol*.

Curse of Frankenstein

© Hammer Films

Christopher Lee's hapless creature was a direct descendant of the brutal as well as brutalized French puppet *Guignol*, whose name and exploits eventually gave rise to French *Grand Guignol* theatre in the late 1800s. Half a century later, Hammer Films introduced this bloody theatrical tradition to the screen.

Silents and Censors

Chapter III

The years 1908 through 1922 were the freest the movies have enjoyed until now. From 1922 until approximately the mid-sixties, however, they continually ran afoul of those who would censor them. And the reason for that is only too plain. Almost from their inception, the movies have always been too damn popular.

D.W. Griffith directed his first film in 1908. It was called *The Adventures of Dollie*, and its reception with the public sparked not only a brilliant career for Griffith, but the maturing of an art form and the birth of the motion picture industry worldwide as well.

Beginning with *Dollie*, Griffith employed every technique devised for the cinema thus far—pans, closeups, etc.—to create what he called a *grammar* of film. Many of his short films and his subsequent feature length films were among the most popular, powerful, and controversial of the silent film era. With the release of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), he became the directorial giant of his day. A man who could do anything. And who did.

In *Intolerance* (1916), his epic but ill-timed hymn to world peace, which was released on the eve of America's entry into World War I and died at the box-office because of it. Griffith elected to portray the history of man's inhumanity to man throughout the ages. The film, which told four stories concurrently and ran for over three hours, examined every aspect of human intolerance imaginable, but with a major emphasis on the areas of sex and violence. There are many scenes of women in partial stages of undress scattered throughout the film's orgiastic Babylonian sequences. Likewise, there are almost as many scenes of explicit gore. Half-naked ladies audiences had seen before. Gore they had not.

During the spectacular siege of Belshazzar's palace by the invading Persian hordes, for example, Belshazzar's loyal bodyguard, the Mighty Man of Valor (Elmo Lincoln), brutally chops off the head of an armed foe in full view of Griffith's camera. This happens not once, but *twice*—its obviously being a favored technique of the bodyguard's. Later, Griffith offers us glimpses of boiling water being poured on people, arrows thudding into soldiers' chests, and a spear being slowly driven into a soldier's naked stomach, blood bubbling up out of the wound as the point sinks in inch by inch. Griffith was obviously not fooling around. He wanted his battle scenes to have the sting of authenticity, to be both brutal and shocking. The results were a real first for the movies: scenes not just of violence, but of explicit gore—of the human body being realistically mutilated. From the moment they appeared, they caused trouble for the infant medium.

Sex and violence thereafter ran riot throughout the movies of the silent era, particularly those of Griffith's fellow pioneer, the flamboyant Cecil B. DeMille. The sex frequently revealed itself in scenes of partial female as well as male nudity. Sexual intercourse and its related passions were left, however, to suggestion, though very often the suggestion was quite blatant. An amusing example occurs in *Intolerance* when the lovesick Mountain Girl (Constance Talmadge) is seen mooning over the man of her dreams while she is milking a cow. The more dreamy-eyed she gets, the more energetic her stroking of the cow's udder becomes. The sexual connotation, I'm sure, was not lost on Griffith.

Ironically, it was not *reel* life, but real life which finally brought the wrath of all the country's would-be censors down around Hollywood's ears. The year was 1921. At a wild bash hosted by world famous funnyman Roscoe (Fatty) Arbuckle at the plush St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco on labor day of that year, a young acress named Virginia Rappe died under mysterious circumstances. It was ascertained later that she had died of a ruptured bladder. Arbuckle himself was accused of causing the rupture with the pressure of his enormous 250 pound weight as he'd tried to rape her. Arbuckle denied everything, but there were guests who testified that they had seen Arbuckle disappear into one of the bedrooms and that later they had heard screams. No one had actually seen Arbuckle commit the crime, nevertheless he stood accused and was tried three times. The first trial ended in a ten to two vote acquittal, as did the second. The third jury acquitted Arbuckle in six minutes, issuing the

Courtesy Samuel K. Rubin

Pioneer director D.W. Griffith and cameraman Marcel Lepicard during the filming of *America* (1924) at Fort Myer, Virginia.

statement that: "Acquittal is not good enough for Roscoe Arbuckle. We feel a great injustice has been done to him and there was not the slightest proof to connect him in any way with the commission of any crime."

The public and the news media didn't buy the verdict, however, and so proceeded to vilify Arbuckle as a symbol of all that was evil and dangerous about that Sodom by the Sea, Hollywood. No matter that Arbuckle was, in fact, innocent. No matter that much evidence had been falsified against him. He became a scapegoat. City mayors and other state government officials ruled unconstitutionally that Arbuckle's films were not to be shown in their communities. Films of his not yet in release were promptly shelved. Arbuckle's career was finished.

But even before the Arbuckle affair had had a chance to die down, however, an even bigger scandal broke. The same year that Arbuckle was finally acquitted of having murdered Virginia Rappe, well known film director William Desmond Taylor was shot dead in his opulent Hollywood home by person or persons unknown. The case has never been solved. But the public furor that erupted over it, combined with the furor over the Arbuckle scandal, sealed Hollywood's fate. The movies, it was shouted from headlines and pulpits all across the country, were a corruptive influence on the lives of anyone they touched. They *had* to be censored. The only remaining question was how?

Acting out of a sense of survival, the movie industry decided that it had better take steps itself. An organization called the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association of America (MPPDAA), which had been created a year before in the wake of the Arbuckle debacle to help foster a better image for Hollywood, was given the power to draft a list of "dos and don'ts" the industry swore it would follow from thence onward in the making of its films. At the head of the MPPDAA stood Will H. Hays, a former U.S. postmaster general under President Warren G. Harding, and a deeply religious man. He took his job quite seriously. And for a time, he did manage to keep the public off the back of Hollywood.

By 1930, however, the public was once again clamoring for a federally sponsored law to censor the movies. This was due to the spate of anarchic and very brutal Warner Brothers gangster movies starring either Jimmy Cagney or Edward G. Robinson that had begun to glut America's movie screens. To get the public off its back this time, the industry allowed a strict Motion Picture Production Code to be written. The Code was adopted in

Intolerance

March that same year, but for all intents and purposes virtually ignored. Four years later, however, following intense pressure from the newly created Catholic Legion of Decency and other groups such as the Federal Council of Churches, the industry finally promised that it would deny distribution to any of its films that did not receive the Code's "seal of approval." Censorship of the movies had at long last become a reality.

The Production Code dipped into every possible area: violence, sex, crime, vulgarity, obscenity, profanity, provocative costuming, suggestive dancing, religion. But the main focus was, as always, on sex and violence. In the area of sex, the Code strictly forbade any scenes showing excessive or lustful kissing, nudity, realistically portrayed seduction or rape, or sexual perversion. The list of don'ts for violence was equally long. The technique of murder, it said, was to be presented in a way that would not inspire imitation; brutal killings were not to be presented in any detail; revenge in modern times (as opposed to, say, *Babylonian*) was never to be justified; repellent subjects such as hangings or electrocutions, brutality or gruesomeness, or surgical operations were all to be treated with the careful limits of "good taste."

For over three decades, the Motion Picture Production Code remained the chief arbiter of what audiences were allowed to see up on the silver screen. Many of its principles were even adopted worldwide. But by the late sixties, the Code had about run its course.

Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive

Elmo Lincoln as the Mighty Man of Valor who is prone to decapitating his enemies.

With the 1968 release of Roger Vadim's *Barbarella*, which had been granted a Code seal of approval despite its being loaded with explicit sexual content as well as scenes of Vadim's wife, Jane Fonda, romping about in the nude, the Code finally bit the dust and was replaced by our present classification system of G, PG, R, and X.

The road back to full freedom of expression for the movies had been a long and circuitous one, marked by a gradual whittling down of restrictions, particularly toward matters of sexual content and language. The fight to portray violence on the screen with the same realism Griffith had once used had been waged much more softly, however. There had been no noisy test cases such as the one involving Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up*, which had been released by M-G-M in 1967 without a Code seal of approval because Antonioni had refused to make certain cuts in the film's explicit sex scenes to comply with Code standards. On the contrary, graphic violence had creeped back into the movies virtually unannounced.

The release of *Bonnie and Clyde*

Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle

Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive

The face of an innocent, Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle. And innocent he was too —of murdering starlet Virginia Rappe. Nevertheless, his scandal helped pave the way for screen censorship.

(1967) finally served to announce it, however. Morally ambiguous (to some critics anyway) and graphically violent, *Bonnie and Clyde* was also a tremendous box-office smash. It was also a hit with most critics. That kind of acceptance helped to relax some of the Code's standards on the treatment of violence on the screen. Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969), released after the Code had been abolished, then sorely tested the new classification system, almost earning an X rating until certain cuts in the film were made. Still, its critical and popular success helped to relax restrictions even more. Together, these two watershed American movies broke the ground that made it possible for the splatter movies of today not just to be made, but, more importantly, to earn widespread release and acceptance in the industry. To become *legitimate cinema*, unlike, say, the exploitation films of gore master Herschell Gordon Lewis, which the industry has never embraced as legitimate and which have seldom gotten decent bookings because of that.

Still, what films had actually served to soften the ground that *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Wild Bunch* later broke? Well, there was Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), of course, with its celebrated shower murder. And then there were the *Psycho* imitators that followed, such as William Castle's ludicrous *Homicidal*, released a year later.

But before any of them . . . there was Hammer.

Bonnie and Clyde

They're young, they're in love, and they kill people. Faye Dunaway and Warren Beatty as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967).

The Wild Bunch

© Warner Brothers, Inc

William Holden as Pike Bishop gets his in the bloody finale to Sam Peckinpah's landmark Western.

Hammer Horror

"I feel inclined to apologize to all decent Americans for sending them a work in such sickening bad taste."
—C.A. Lejeune
London Observer, 1957
Upon release of Hammer's *Horror of Dracula*

Chapter IV

Curse of Frankenstein

Sickening bad taste. In light of all that's come since, it's hard to imagine how anyone could have considered Hammer's now rather tame horror thrillers of the late fifties and early sixties to have been either sickening *or* in bad taste. And yet Ms. Lejeune's attitude was the prevailing one in the press at the time. *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957), *Horror of Dracula* (1958), *The Revenge of Frankenstein* (1958), *The Mummy* (1959), *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1959), *The Brides of Dracula* (1960), *The Curse of the Werewolf* (1961), *The Phantom of the Opera* (1962)—all were hailed upon release as being in the vanguard of a very dubious new wave: explicit horror and violence in the cinema.

Though mild by today's standards, Hammer's early films caught on with the public in a big way, so much so that the name Hammer became practically a household word, particularly among teenagers—as famous as M-G-M or Warner Brothers. Actors Peter Cushing and Christopher Lee, essentially unknown to filmgoers before their appearances in Hammer's *Curse of Frankenstein*, became stars of the first magnitude—again, mostly to the young. The company made millions, spawning a host of imitators, such as Milton Subotsky and Max J. Rosenberg's Amicus Productions, and many others before it finally faded from the film scene in the late seventies.

Success for Hammer had taken a long time in coming, however. The company had been in existence since 1934, created by a former jewelry shop owner named William Hinds. Hinds adopted the name Will Hammer, a former vaudeville moniker, when he went into film production and distribution, registering his new company in his stage name as well. Among Hammer's partners was theater owner Enrique Carreras, whose son James and grandson Michael, along with Hammer's own son, Anthony Hinds, were to be instrumental in making the name Hammer Film Productions Ltd. world-famous 23 years later.

© Hammer Films

Hammer's *Curse of Frankenstein* (1957) was *Grand Guignol* in the traditionally Gothic British tradition, but with a dash of the French thrown in.

Hammer's films for the first two decades of its existence were basically "programmers," B-pictures aimed exclusively at the domestic British market. Some of its films such as *The Mystery of the Marie Celeste* (1936), starring Bela Lugosi, did achieve a wider distribution, but not until Hammer's release of *The Quatermass Xperiment* in 1955 did box office success on a much grander scale beckon.

Based on a highly successful BBC television serial by Nigel Kneale, *The Quatermass Xperiment* employed science-fiction trappings to tell what

was essentially a monster-on-the-loose horror story. Hammer went so far as to advertise the film's "X" certificate (for horror) by incorporating it into the film's title. The film was a phenomenal success even in America, where its title was changed to *The Creeping Unknown* (1956).

Three more science-fiction/horror films followed, two of which were also based on successful TV plays by Nigel Kneale. Each was modestly successful, but none proved to be the box office bonanza Hammer was seeking to put it over the top in the global marketplace.

The year 1957 changed all that, however, for it was then that the company finally struck its richest vein. Science-fiction was set aside in favor of a more homegrown formula, that of *Grand Guignol* done in the traditionally Gothic British style, but with a dash of the French thrown in. Black and white was scrapped in favor of color in order to enhance the lush period settings and costumes as well as a new ingredient, blood. Subjects with names like Frankenstein and Dracula in them, names already familiar to moviegoers the world over, were selected in order to create a ready audience for the company's new product upfront.

The Curse of Frankenstein, Hammer's maiden effort, cost around $160,000 to make. When James Carreras screened the film for Warner Brothers executives, the response was immediate and enthusiastic—though it's been reported that Jack Warner himself hated it. Warners picked up *Curse* for worldwide release, and the film went on to gross in the neighborhood of $5 million, making it Hammer's most triumphant success to date and proof positive that its newly discovered formula was a solid one.

Horror of Dracula, which followed a year later, was influenced even more heavily by the French style of *Grand Guignol*. It was bloodier, its effects of stakes being driven through human hearts and Dracula's rotting away in the sunrise far more graphic and spectacular. And it proved to be an even bigger success. For Hammer, no further proof was needed. *Grand Guignol* meant very big business indeed.

Though Hammer had decided to harken back to the classic Universal horror films of the '30s for its subject matter, neither *The Curse of Frankenstein* nor *Horror of Dracula* could actually be called remakes of the James Whale and Tod Browning films which had preceeded them. Neither were they unduly influenced by their forebears. Director Terence Fisher, in fact, went out of his way to avoid screening the earlier films for fear of duplicating them in any way. He was after a totally different approach, and *Grand Guignol* provided it. The Universal films were much more influenced by German fairy tales and legends in the tradition of the Brothers Grimm and by the silent expressionist cinema of Murnau and Lang than by either French or British *Grand Guignol*.

Revenge, a major recurring theme throughout the brutal French puppet shows of a century earlier and the *Grand Guignol* plays which followed, showed up likewise as the central plot thrust of most of the early Hammers and many of the company's later films as well. The word itself was even included as part of the title of the company's second Frankenstein film, *The Revenge of Frankenstein*.

Consistent with *Grand Guignol*, this revenge was usually exacted in Hammer's productions in some violent form, the avenger occasionally biding his time for years (or, in the case of *The Mummy*, for centuries) to claim his just and grisly due.

In *Brides of Dracula*, for example, Baron Meinster (David Peel) turns his own mother (Martita Hunt) into a vampire because she'd kept him imprisoned by her side for years in order to prevent him from putting the bite on anyone else in the neighborhood. Afterwards Meinster goes on a rampage, claiming as his bride every able-bodied girl he meets, until he is finally stopped by a pretty schoolteacher (Yvonne Monlaur) and that obsessive vampire hunter, Dr. Van Helsing (Peter Cushing).

In *Curse of the Werewolf*, beggar Richard Wordsworth is also imprisoned, though unjustly so, by a villainous Spanish Marques (Anthony Dawson). Years later, having degenerated into an animal, he too takes revenge by raping a servant girl (Yvonne Romain), who later gives birth to a werewolf (Oliver Reed). The servant girl then claims revenge for both her-

Le Vampyre

French Cultural Services

© Hammer Films

The influence of French-style *Grand Guignol* on Hammer's gothic thrillers of the fifties is easily discerned in these remarkably similar photographs. The photo on the left is from a performance of a *Théâtre du Grand Guignol* horror play called *Le Vampyre*. The photo above—from Hammer's *Hound of the Baskervilles* (1959).

© Hammer Films

Dracula (Christopher Lee) rots away in the sunrise in Hammer's *Horror of Dracula* (1958), a film which *London Observer* film critic Carol Lejeune considered to be in sickening bad taste.

Horror of Dracula

Horror of Dracula

© Hammer Films

Occasionally Hammer would spice up the gore in its films for the Japanese market. Here's a clip we never saw Stateside: the undead Jonathan Harker (John Van Eyssen) lying in repose.

self and the beggar by stabbing the Marques to death, while Reed later exacts an even more extreme form of revenge on behalf of his father and mother by terrorizing the countryside and slaughtering both animals *and* people. In the end though, he is finally released from his torment when he is shot down with a silver bullet fired by his *adoptive* father (Clifford Evans).

The revenge elements implicit in the plot of Hammer's last Universal-inspired horror film, *The Phantom of the Opera* (1962), are, of course, only too obvious—the phantom's terrorizing the opera house and killing people because he has been wronged by a villainous impresario (Michael Gough).

Interesting too about these early Hammers is that supernatural elements were always pushed as far into the background as possible even if the film itself had an obviously supernatural theme. It was almost as if Hammer (or, more precisely, director Terence Fisher) felt that audiences would not accept scenes of gory realism in films of an overtly fantastic nature. In *Horror of Dracula*, for example, the king of the vampires (Christopher Lee), while given a supernatural presence (his footsteps, for example, make no sound), is denied the traditional power to alter his shape. He is also given an obvious sexual charisma; both his behavior and the nature of his appeal are made to seem more like perversion than anything else.

This emphasis on "realism" was echoed even more strongly in *Brides of Dracula*, where the cause of Baron Meinster's affliction is attributed not to supernatural forces, but to his having been "corrupted at school," an obvious reference to homosexuality is ever there was one. That Meinster directs his revenge chiefly at his mother, and then other women, would seem to bear this out. Traditional horror films though Hammer's early productions were in many ways, they were also quite adventurous in the emphasis they placed on character development and motivation. The two flowed as freely as the blood throughout these early efforts, the graphic realism of the one serving, perhaps, as an impetus for the other two to become more realistic as well.

The abundance of rich acting talent available in England combined with the unsnobbish willingness of that talent to work even in low budget horror films such as those made by Hammer doubtless had a lot to do with the high calibre of the acting and characterization to be found in Hammer's early films. Actors and

The Man Who Could Cheat Death

actresses such as Richard Wordsworth, Leo McKern, Martita Hunt, Hazel Court, Gordon Jackson, Lionel Jeffries, Robert Urquhart, Michael Ripper, Guy Rolfe, and Michael Gough among many others brought a wealth of experience on stage and screen (both large *and* small) to their work for the company. And Hammer, of course, reaped the rewards of all this experience in the form of delightful bits of pure characterization sprinkled throughout its films which served to flesh them out and many times to lift them a cut or two above the norm.

One actor above all stands out even now, however, as having provided the single most important contribution to the success of Hammer's initial experiments in *Grand Guignol*. He is Peter Cushing.

Already 44 when he made his debut as the screen's most friendish scientist, Baron von Frankenstein in Hammer's *The Curse of Frankenstein*, Cushing had acquired a solid reputation for himself in England for his diversified performances on stage and especially on TV during the early fifties. Outside England, however, he was a virtual unknown even though he had spent some years in Hollywood prior to World War II. There, he'd secured some minor parts in films such as Laurel and Hardy's *A Chump at Oxford* (1940) and one major role opposite Carole Lombard and Brian Aherne in George Stevens's prestigious 1940 drama about life in a provincial English hospital, *Vigil in the Night*. But the war had interrupted everything.

The Curse of Frankenstein, however, brought Cushing worldwide fame. Though Christopher Lee would become equally well known and just as strongly identified with Hammer, it is Peter Cushing who remains etched in the minds of most even now as the chief icon of Hammer's early films. His series of characterizations alone served not only to clearly define the burgeoning genre now known as Hammer Horror but to provide an important link between Hammer's introduction of French style *Grand Guignol* to the cinema and the brutal French puppet shows of a century before. As portrayed by Peter Cushing, Baron von Frankenstein, Dr. Van Helsing, and to some extent even Sherlock Holmes were as heartless a trio as *Punch*, *Judy*, or *Guignol* themselves had ever been.

Cushing acknowledges that his portrayal of the amoral Baron von Frankenstein was patterned after the real life anatomist Dr. Robert Knox of Burke and Hare fame. But Cushing's Baron is decidedly more pitiless in his obsessive quest for knowledge than Knox ever was. In his quest to create life—to duel, as it were, with God—Cushing's Baron seems instead much more like Herman Melville's equally obsessed and pitiless hero Captain Ahab, whose hatred of the white whale that has bested him by claiming his leg sparks Ahab's long sea voyage of vengeance.

Cushing's Baron von Frankenstein too seems bent on vengeance in that he too is compelled by some twisted inner drive to beat nature at its own game. His quest to create life is in effect a quest to become an equal to God. Like Ahab, the Baron views the power of God as a monstrous insult to him as a man. Cushing's Baron is ruthless and cruel and even a murderer—more a monster, in fact, than the mindless, feeble creature (Christopher Lee) that he eventually succeeds in giving life.

In Hammer's second *Frankenstein* film, the Baron's amorality becomes even more pronounced as he uses a clinic for the poor as a sort of flesh and blood garden from which to pluck whatever organs he needs for his experiments. He gives no thought whatsoever to the poor wretches whose lives and anatomies he destroys in the process. Ironically, his experiment this time results in his giving life to a creature with cannibalistic tendencies—not unlike himself.

In *The Curse of Frankenstein* and *The Revenge of Frankenstein*, Peter Cushing's performance as the intellectually brilliant but cruel and callous Baron von Frankenstein seemed to embody for the first time on screen the pervasive heartlessness of French *Grand Guignol* theatre.

Equally significant is Cushing's performance as the neurotic vampire destroyer Dr. Van Helsing in Hammer's follow-up film, *Horror of Dracula*. Again his character is one bent on an obsessive quest for vengeance —this time against the King of Vampires, Count Dracula. In his pursuit of Dracula, Van Helsing pounds stakes through human hearts with-

© Hammer Films

Playwright Barré Lyndon's *The Man in Half Moon Street* was a *Grand Guignol* drama in the restrained British tradition. But for its second film incarnation, Hammer's *The Man Who Could Cheat Death* (1959), it was given a distinctly French *Grand Guignol* flavor.

out batting an eyelash, just as Baron von Frankenstein before him had wallowed up to his elbows in human blood and body parts without exhibiting the slightest qualm. So intense is Van Helsing's determination to "rid the world of this unspeakable evil" that eventually Dracula himself is made to seem like the underdog.

In the film's final shot, after he has finally turned Dracula to dust, Cushing's demeanor suggests not a feeling of final victory, but one of overwhelming defeat and sadness, for by having destroyed his nemesis, he has really destroyed himself. Of what need is God when the threat of the devil is no longer present? Again, the pervasive tone is one of heartlessness. Even success brings only pain and terror.

Peter Cushing even brought elements of his Frankenstein and Van Helsing personas to the character of Sherlock Holmes in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Little seems to matter to his Holmes save the solution to the mystery. Cushing's Holmes is not simply cerebral and dispassionate, qualities we have come to accept as defining the character of Sherlock Holmes, but, like Frankenstein and Van Helsing, obsessive and at times even fanatical in his quest to attain the powers only God may possess. At one point he even endangers the life of his client, Sir Henry Baskerville (Christopher Lee), in a last ditch effort to solve the mystery of the phantom hound which has cursed and killed the Baskerville line for centuries.

Hammer has since faded largely from the filmmaking scene. It no longer holds any influence over either the horror film genre or the splatter movie sub-genre which for the moment seems to have replaced the traditional horror film. Hammer itself never really made splatter movies as such. Its productions, though occasionally quite gruesome, were more in keeping with the psychological tone of splatter movies as personified chiefly by the characters played by Peter Cushing.

Hammer probably lost its position of influence simply because the competition became too stiff. Roger Corman's Poe films and Amicus's anthology films soon glutted the market with Gothic horror. By 1970 when Hammer finally decided to spice up its own output with the release of *The Vampire Lovers*, nudity had already become a fixture even in mainstream movies, and scenes of explicit gore had found their way into mainstream movies like *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Wild Bunch*, thereby pulling the rug out from under Hammer altogether. Even the face of *Grand Guignol* had changed with the release of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*. The British tradition of castles and costumes now no longer seemed to appeal to audiences. They preferred instead to have their horrors take place in run down motels of the present or decaying Southern mansions of a more recent past. Once a leader, Hammer had become a follower. Now, though still active, the company is mostly a memory.

Still, the significance of Hammer to film history cannot be minified. When Hammer started showing blood in its films, other companies soon started showing it in theirs. In the ten year interval between Hammer's release of its watershed *The Curse of Frankenstein* and the explosive appearance of *Bonnie and Clyde*, the rules of censorship pertaining to scenes of explicit gore and violence on the screen had become considerably relaxed. Hammer had played no small part in bringing about that relaxation. Furthermore, for good or for ill, Hammer had paved the way for the splatter movies of today by providing them with an essential ingredient in their development—a visible link to their *Grand Guignol* past.

Andy Warhol's Frankenstein (1974), one of the most freakish of the new wave of splatter movies that began hitting movie screens in the early seventies, went on to acknowledge splatter's debt to Hammer in full. Produced by Carlo Ponti on a budget of $500,000, the film seemed almost a hommage to the gore in Hammer's *Frankenstein* films and to the viler implications of the *Frankenstein* legend at large.

Directed with an eye toward the completely revolting by Warhol's house director, Paul Morrissey, the film dealt with a Baron von Frankenstein (Udo Kier) who is more obsessed than even Hammer or Peter Cushing could have imagined him. In love with his sister (Monique Van Vooren),

Peter Cushing

© Hammer Films

Peter Cushing as the heartless hero of Hammer's *Curse of Frankenstein*—more a villain than the mindless, feeble creature that he succeeds in giving life.

Stranglers of Bombay

© Hammer Films

French-style *Grand Guignol* often found its way into Hammer's non-horror films too, such as Terence Fisher's *Stranglers of Bombay* (1960), an action drama about the Thuggee reign of terror against the British in India of the 1850s.

Horror of Dracula

© Hammer Films

Peter Cushing as Dr. Van Helsing, the neurotic vampire destroyer. He pounds stakes through human hearts without batting an eyelash.

Hound of the Baskervilles

© Hammer Films

In Hammer's *Hound of the Baskervilles*, the fanatical Sherlock Holmes (Peter Cushing) even endangers the life of his client (Christopher Lee) to solve the case. Dr. Watson (Andre Morell) looks on.

Frankenstein and the Monster from Hell

© Hammer Films

By the time *Frankenstein and the Monster from Hell* (1973) appeared, Hammer had lost its power to compete. Here, Dave Prowse plays the gorilla-like final creation of the mad Dr. F.

with whom he has spawned two very strange children, this Frankenstein seems to have only one desire in life; to paw, grope, and fondle every internal organ the human body contains. At one point, he even tears open a lengthy stitch in the side of his gorgeous female creature (Delila Di Lazzaro), and, mounting her, announces to the audience in all panting seriousness that ". . . to know death, one must first fuck life in the gall bladder."

In the end though, the Baron gets his comeuppance when his male creature (Srdjan Zelenovic) runs a spear through him, tearing out his gall bladder. For added effect, this splatter movie was shot in 3-D so that the Baron's innards wind up dangling about three feet from his nose and

Andy Warhol's Frankenstein

Bryanston Pictures

It's a good thing this photo isn't in 3-D! From Paul Morrissey's hommage to the viler implications of the Frankenstein legend, *Andy Warhol's Frankenstein* (1972).

about two inches from ours.

Warhol's follow-up, *Blood for Dracula* (1974), which was again directed by Morrissey, sacrificed some of its outlandish gore for comedy of an equally bizarre nature. In the film, Udo Kier plays a Count Dracula who can only sup on virgin's blood (otherwise he throws up). To find these virgins, he abandons Transylvania for Roman Catholic Italy, settling down next to a plush villa inhabited by nobleman Vittorio DeSica, his three nubile daughters and a lascivious handyman (Joe Dallesandro), who speaks with a Brooklyn accent and who winds up saving the daughters by deflowering them moments before the vampire can sink his teeth in. As it always must in a true splatter movie, however, gore triumphs at the film's conclusion: Dracula is "staked out," but not until he's had both his arms and legs chopped off.

Bryanston Pictures

At the conclusion of *Blood for Dracula* (1973), the vampire (Udo Kier) is finally staked out, but not before he's had both his arms and legs chopped off.

The Godfather of Gore: Herschell Gordon Lewis

"*Blood Feast* I've often referred to as a Walt Whitman poem—it's no good, but it's the first of its type and therefore it deserves a certain position."
—Herschell Gordon Lewis*

**Kings of the Bs* by Todd McCarthy and Charles Flynn, Dutton, 1975, page 352.

Chapter V

Inactive as a feature filmmaker since 1971, Chicago-based independent producer-director Herschell Gordon Lewis nevertheless holds a preeminent position as the man who brought the splatter movie into full being. He literally was *the first*. And however ineptly made his films appear to us today (and did appear even at the time of their original release), they remain preeminent too as examples of splatter cinema in its purest form.

Prior to H.G. Lewis, splatter movies had but inched forward in their march toward becoming a full-blown movie genre. After him, they seemed to mature almost overnight into a powerful source of expression (and revenue) for filmmakers everywhere. And the tide has not yet gone out, for today Lewis's type of film is flourishing in a way that Lewis himself probably never would have thought possible, a fact which must both please and depress him. The former because it assures him of his place as a pioneer, the latter because his metiér is now more closely associated with others—like George A. Romero, for example, and David Cronenberg.

A one-time professor of English at the University of Mississippi, H.G. Lewis began his career in film in the late fifties. The owner of a chain of movie theatres in the Chicago area, he also headed up his own advertising agency. Both jobs proved good experience for his future endeavors, for one revealed to him the ins and outs of film distribution and exhibition, while the other gave him a working knowledge of film production—in the form of 30 and 60 second television spots produced for his various clients.

One interest fed the other until, inevitably, he decided to combine them under a single umbrella. Together with partner Dave Friedman, he formed Mid-Continent Films, and in 1960 produced his first low budget feature film, *The Prime Time*, prints of which apparently no longer exist. The film was not a success. Mid-Continent's second outing, *Living Venus* (1961), an example of *cinema à clef* in that it dealt with a girly magazine publisher patterned very loosely after *Playboy*'s Hugh Hefner, was likewise unsuccessful, though prints of it have survived. Nevertheless, *Living Venus* did spur Lewis onto the realization that if he was to survive in the filmmaking business, if he was to compete successfully for theatre space with Hollywood's bigger budgeted, classier and far more professional looking productions, then he had better develop some kind of a hook for his films, a gimmick that would pull audiences in because they couldn't get it elsewhere, not even from Hollywood. And so he began making nudies.

Lucky Pierre (1961), his first, was shot in only four days with Friedman acting as both producer and soundman and Lewis as writer-director and cameraman. The film starred a local Chicago comedian named Billy Falbo, whose forté was slapstick, and, as Lewis puts it, ". . .six of the ugliest girls you've ever seen." When the film earned back its cost and then some, Lewis and his partner knew they were on the right track. They abandoned the idea of doing "serious" films, which despite their many failings both *The Prime Time* and *Living Venus* were intended to be, and became makers of exploitation films instead.

Nature's Playmates (1962), *Daughters of the Sun* (1962), *B-O-I-N-N-N-G!* (1962) and *Goldilocks and the Three Bares* (1963) followed in quick succession. But by 1963, nudity of the tame sort Lewis and Friedman had been using to sell their films had begun to creep into Hollywood's product as well. Street-wise filmmakers by now, the pair quickly perceived that a relaxation of censorship laws toward nudity and sex on the screen would soon deprive them of their competitive edge. Cued not only by the success of Hammer's modestly gruesome series of horror films, but by the success of Hitchcock's *Psycho* and its host of imitators and by his own marketing instincts as well, Lewis decided to move in an entirely different direction. He replaced sex with gore.

Blood Feast (1963), produced, directed, photographed and scored by Herschell Gordon Lewis, holds the distinction, however dubious, of being the cinema's first full-fledged splatter movie, though Lewis himself refers to it as a "gore film," which amounts to the same thing. Filmed in only nine days on location in Miami for well under $70,000, the film deals with the revivification of a long dead Egyptian princess by a lunatic

Blood Feast

Courtesy *Cinefantastique*

Blood Feast (1963) holds the distinction, however dubious, of being the cinema's first full-fledged splatter movie. Here a girls brains have been torn out.

Blood Feast

Courtesy *Cinefantastique*

Say what you will about him, Lewis is not a sentimentalist. From *Blood Feast*, Lewis's mindless, virtually plotless, but high-spirited orgy of gore for gore's sake.

who thinks he's sort of a modern Dr. Frankenstein.

Spinning off somewhat from Hammer's *Frankenstein* films, Lewis has his madman "hero" collect the spare parts he needs for the job not from any morgue or graveyard but from a number of voluptuous young girls who are still quite alive and breathing. In fact, so zealous is this nut to replace his princess's moldy old parts with new ones that he doesn't even wait for his victims to die before he starts ripping off limbs and scooping out internal organs. In medium shot and, for the most part, without editing, Lewis reveals to us how to rip a girl's tongue out of her head. He also shows us another girl's brains being torn out, and still other flesh and blood female "puppets" are sequentially hacked to shreds in all kinds of ways. Say what you will about him, Lewis is not a sentimentalist.

As Lewis had intended, *Blood Feast* was a mindless, virtually plotless, but high-spirited orgy of gore for gore's sake, which, upon its initial release to drive-ins in the South, managed to shock both the popcorn eaters and the neckers alike into wide-eyed, open-mouthed attention. Its like had never been seen before in a commercial feature film.

Scorned by furious critics who deemed the film "amateur night at the butcher shop," *Blood Feast* nevertheless went on to become Lewis's first huge success and his biggest hit ever. It was followed by *2000 Maniacs* (1964), a bigger-budgeted, more serious effort on Lewis's part (*he* says), which tells the story of a Southern town ravaged by Yankee troops during the Civil War that claims its revenge a hundred years later when its citizens kill and dismember a group of tourists visiting from the North. One sees in its storyline (scripted by Lewis) of a revenge which breaks the barriers of time in ironic fashion a hazy reflection for the first time of Rod Serling's TV series *The Twilight Zone*, which seems to have had some small influence on Lewis in the way that he occasionally blends a basically science-fiction theme with a supernatural one. *The Twilight Zone* influence would again crop up two years later in *Monster-A-Go-Go* (1965), a film about an American astronaut who returns to earth as an overgrown radioactive monster, and in *The Wizard of Gore* (1971), which deals with a magician whose bloody stage illusions become equally grisly realities hours after they have been performed.

Lewis went all out in promoting *2000 Maniacs* even to the extent of writing a novelization of his screenplay, which was eventually published to tie in with the film's release. But for some reason, the public did not respond to *2000 Maniacs* as strongly as it had to *Blood Feast*. In fact, not until the release of *She Devils on Wheels* in 1968, a film about an all-girl gang of motorcyclists who, perhaps responding to *Blood Feast*'s overt sexism, decapitate and mutilate only men, would another Lewis gore film hit the jackpot at the box office. But by then Lewis had dissolved his partnership with Dave Friedman and was now making films on his own. Friedman meanwhile went on to become president of the Adult Film Association of America and a distributor of porno films and videocassettes.

It is indeed ironic that while Lewis's films proved a potent influence in setting the basic ground rules to be followed by today's plethora of splatter movies, Lewis himself never rose above his position as a loner on the edge of cinema's lunatic fringe. As a director, he has never even been considered seriously—except in France, of course, where just about everyone gets exalted by the critics at one time or another, especially if his films are banned there, which Lewis's were as late as 1975. Of course, the reason for Lewis's remaining on the fringe is fairly plain. His films are, quite simply, awful.

Technically and aesthetically, Lewis's last gore film, *The Gore Gore Girls* (a.k.a. *Blood Orgy*, 1971) is as awesomely amateurish as his first. The absurdly low budgets he had to work with can't be blamed entirely for this, however, as both George A. Romero and Tobe Hooper went on to make their first splatter films for roughly comparable costs and yet *Night of the Living Dead* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* exhibit a polish that belies their lack of adequate financing.

Lewis's films on the other hand are virtually devoid of professionalism, almost intentionally so, it seems.

Even their celebrated gore effects seem tacky and unrealistic not only by today's standards but by the standards of their own time as well. The amazing thing is that not only does Lewis seem to realize this, he actually seems to revel in it. His films seem to wear their shoddiness like a badge of honor.

To avoid the cost of on-location sound recording, Lewis shoots many of his sequences silently, adding music or voluminous quantities of narration later to cover the lack of sound. Sequences which have been shot using synchronized sound, however, are usually so badly miked that the actors' dialogue can scarcely be heard. In fact, the most audible sound is usually that of Lewis's insufficiently sound-proofed camera whirring away!

Lighting for night scenes is most often accomplished using one or possibly two photofloods, which has the effect of over-exposing the foreground while making the background appear like deep space. There are no camera movements except for an occasional pan, continuity is often mis-matched, and sound effects which have been post-synchronized onto the track later are often over amplified to the point of absurdity. Occasionally a sound effect is even left out. This bit of ineptitude occurs specifically in *Monster-A-Go-Go*, a film credited to director Bill Rebane, but which bears the unmistakable stamp of its producer and additional dialogue writer Sheldon Seymour (Lewis), when an overzealous army colonel scrambles to answer a phone which isn't even ringing.

As for the quality of the acting in Lewis's films, well, the less said about that the better; even Lewis admits that solid acting is not one of the hallmarks of his work, as his casts are most often made up of friends, relatives, ex-*Playboy* bunnies and Playmates-of-the-Month, and other non-professionals. Lewis himself even appears in a featured role in his modern Dracula story, *A Taste of Blood* (1967), posing as, of all things, an Englishman. This came about when the actor he'd originally signed for the part, another non-professional, failed to appear for shooting. Rather than wait, Lewis pressed on, carefree in his substitution of one awkwardness for another. Just like a beginning Super 8 filmmaker, who, seldom requiring more than one take, never misses an opportunity to shoot a bad piece of film. Besides, in a Lewis gore film, only the gore itself matters.

One significant result of Lewis's seemingly willful avoidance of craftsmanship, however, is that his films emerge more laughable than either shocking or offensive. Possessed of a sharp sense of humor about his work (responding to a film magazine's suggestion that his work was a subject worthy of further research, Lewis replied that the same could also be said of cancer), Lewis imbues his films with an off-beat sense of the absurd. It's as if, knowing that his work is schlock, he calls deliberate attention to the fact, serving up dialogue that is intentionally ridiculous and situations that are so excessive in their bloodthirstiness that they too seem ridiculous.

Monster-A-Go-Go, which borrows its plot quite liberally from Hammer's *The Creeping Unknown* and M-G-M's *First Man Into Space* (1959), offered audiences a ten foot high radioactive monster (played by an actor with the improbable name of Henry *Hite*) who sucks the life out of earthlings, leaving them with faces resembling dried prunes in the throes of a scream. At one point in the drama, the off-screen narrator, who sounds like Rod Serling at one point and the intense narrator of one of Louis de Rochemont's postwar docudramas at other times, clues the audience in on all the action that's been happening behind-the-scenes with this typically Lewisian monologue:

"Dr. Logan did know where the giant was—in a storeroom in that very building. Logan had learned that massive doses of the antidote brought about an almost human appearance, but with such unpredictable side effects that enough tranquilizer to subdue 10 ordinary men had to be given each day. This day it was late. Logan knew that each passing minute might mean a return to violence. As it turned out he was too late. Like his brother, the scientist had an intuitive knowledge of the situation. *Thus an extraordinarily bad sense of timing.*"

One does not need to be very astute to realize that Lewis is obviously

2000 Maniacs

Courtesy *Cinefantastique*

Southern hospitality from *2000 Maniacs* (1964), a bigger budgeted, more serious film on Lewis's part, *he* says.

2000 Maniacs

Courtesy *Cinefantastique*

It's sink or . . . *sink* for this "damn yankee" in Lewis's revenge-laden *2000 Maniacs.*

Courtesy *Cinefantastique*

These two are a real barrel of laughs—though not to the guy inside the barrel. Notice the absurdly fiendish grins on their faces, a Lewis trademark.

sending his film up in that ridiculous monologue. Likewise, the orgies of gore in *Blood Feast* and his other films serve much the same purpose. They de-fuse these films of their psychological grimness, turning them into, not comedies, perhaps, but exercises in outrageousness and absurdity. If it weren't for this sense of their own absurdity, in fact, Lewis' films would be little more than Nazi death camp films re-staged as entertainment. Audiences would accept quite a lot from his films, but they would not accept being left psychologically down by them. At least not repeatedly. Lewis understood this right off and in his films seemed to be saying: "Realism has its limits, folks. Go too far with it, and it ceases to be realism at all."

This is a very clear and intuitive message about the limited effectiveness of showing graphically violent events on the screen, one which would not be lost on George A. Romero, as we shall see in the next chapter. If splatter cinema was to continue to develop, it would require something more than realism alone to sell itself. Otherwise it would soon repell audiences rather than draw them in. Here too Herschell Gordon Lewis had pointed the way. Ironically, he would never really gain from his insight as his mantel would soon fall to others. As the genre grew, he would, like Hammer Films, lose the power to compete.

The Splatter Movies of Herschell Gordon Lewis

Blood Feast (1963)
A Friedman-Lewis Production (Box Office Spectaculars)
Color, 75 minutes
Producer: David F. Friedman
Director/Photographer: Herschell Gordon Lewis
Screenplay: Allison Louise Downe
Music: Herschell Gordon Lewis
Editing: Robert Sinise, Frank Romolo
Cast: Connie Mason, Thomas Wood, Mal Arnold, Lyn Bolton, Scott H. Hall, Toni Calvert

2000 Maniacs (1964)
A Friedman-Lewis Production (Box Office Spectaculars)
Color, 75 minutes
Producer/Art Director: David Friedman
Director/Photographer/Writer: Herschell Gordon Lewis
Music: Larry Wellington and The Pleasant Valley Boys
Editing: Robert Sinise
Cast: Connie Mason, Thomas Wood, Jeffrey Allen, Ben Moore, Shelby

Livingston, Vincent Santo, Gary Bakeman, Mark Douglas, Michael Korb

Color Me Blood Red (1964)
A Box Office Spectaculars Production
Color, 74 minutes
Producer: David F. Friedman
Director/Photographer/Writer: Herschell Gordon Lewis
Assistant Photographer: Andy Romanoff
Editing: Robert Sinise
Cast: Don Joseph, Candi Conder, Scott H. Hall, Elyn Warner, Patricia Lee, Jerome Eden, Jim Jaekel

Monster-A-Go-Go (1965)
(a.k.a. *Terror at Halfday*)
B.I.&L. Releasing Corp.
B&W, 70 minutes
Producer/Additional Dialogue Writer: Sheldon Seymour (H.G. Lewis)
Director: Bill Rebane
Screenplay: Jeff Smith, Bill Rebane, Don Stanford
Photographer: Frank Pfeiffer
Cast: Phil Morton, June Travis, George Perry, Lois Brooke, Henry Hite

The Gruesome Twosome (1966)
A Mayflower Production
Executive Producer: Fred M. Sandy
Producer/Director/Photographer: Herschell Gordon Lewis
Screenplay: Allison Louise Downe
Music: Larry Wellington
Cast: Elizabeth David, Chris Martel, Gretchen Welles, Rodney Bedell

Something Weird (1966)
A Mayflower Production
B&W, 83 minutes
Producer/Writer: James F. Hurley
Director: Herschell Gordon Lewis
Photographer: Andy Romanoff
Cast: Tony McCabe, Elizabeth Lee, William Brooker

How To Make a Doll (1967)
An Argent Production (Unusual Films)
Color, 81 minutes
Executive Producer: David Chudnow
Producer/Director: Herschell Gordon Lewis
Screenplay: Bert Ray, Sheldon Seymour (H.G. Lewis)
Photographer: Roy Collodi
Music: Larry Wellington
Editing: Eskandar Ameripoor
Cast: Robert Wood, Jim Vance, Bobbi West, Elizabeth Davis, Margie Lester, Dolores Johnson

A Taste Of Blood (1967)
(a.k.a. *The Secret of Dr. Alucard*)
Color, 120 minutes
Executive Producer: Sidney J. Reich
Producer/Director: Herschell Gordon Lewis
Screenplay: Donald Stanford
Photographer: Andy Romanoff
Music: Larry Wellington
Editing: Richard Brinkman
Cast: Bill Rogers, Elizabeth Wilkinson, Thomas Wood, Otto Schlesinger, Eleanor Valli, Lawrence Tobin, H.G. Lewis

She-Devils On Wheels (1968)
A Mayflower Production
Color, 83 minutes
Executive Producer: Fred M. Sandy
Producer/Director: Herschell Gordon Lewis
Screenplay: Allison Louise Downe
Photographer: Ray Collodi
Music: Robert Lewis, Sheldon Seymour (H.G. Lewis)
Editing: Richard Brinkman
Cast: Betty Connell, Pat Poston, Nancy Lee Noble, Christie Wagner, Rodney Bedell, Ruby Tuesday, John Weymer

The Wizard Of Gore (1970)
A Mayflower Production
Color, 96 minutes
Producer: Fred M. Sandy
Director: Herschell Gordon Lewis
Screenplay: Allen Kahn
Photographer/Editor: Eskandar Ameripoor
Music: Larry Wellington
Cast: Ray Sager, Judy Cler, Wayne Ratay, Phil Laurensen, Jim Rau, John Elliott, Don Alexander

The Gore-Gore Girls (1971)
(a.k.a. *Blood Orgy*)
A Lewis Motion Picture Enterprises Production
Color, 90 minutes
Producer/Director: Herschell Gordon Lewis
Screenplay: Alan Dachman
Photographer/Editor: Eskandar Ameripoor
Music: Sheldon Seymour (H.G. Lewis)
Cast: Frank Kress, Amy Farrell, Hedda Lubin, Russ Badger, Nora Alexis, Phil Laurenson, Frank Rice, Ray Seger, Henny Youngman

Color Me Blood Red

Courtesy Hollywood Book & Poster

"A blood-spattered study in the macabre drenched in crimson color!" was the ad slogan for Lewis's *Color Me Blood Red* (1964), the story of an artist who murders his models so that he can use their blood in his work. Must be that he couldn't afford the price of Grumbacher Red.

Color Me Blood Red

Courtesy Hollywood Book & Poster

Modern art? No, just another hacked up model from Lewis's *Color Me Blood Red*.

Color Me Blood Red

Courtesy Hollywood Book & Poster

The mad artist of Lewis's *Color Me Blood Red* at last decides to do a self-portrait. SPLAT!

Something Weird

Courtesy Hollywood Book & Poster

"It's not that I don't find you attractive, but couldn't we just be friends?" From *Something Weird* (1966), Lewis's story of a man who gets his face fried in a power line accident.

Courtesy Hollywood Book & Poster

A Taste of Blood (1967) was Lewis's updated nod to vampire movies. Here, Dr. Alucard (Dracula spelled backwards) stalks his next victim.

She-Devils on Wheels

Courtesy Movie Star News

Responding, perhaps, to the overt sexism of Lewis's previous films, the girls start to get even in *She-Devils on Wheels* (1968), the story of an all-girl gang of motorcyclists that calls itself "The Man-Eaters."

She-Devils on Wheels

Courtesy Movie Star News

She-Devils on Wheels turned out to be Lewis's biggest box-office success since *Blood Feast* (1963), proving, after all, that there really is a market out there for women's pictures.

She-Devils on Wheels

Courtesy Hollywood Book & Poster

I can't decide which is more hideous: the wound in this guy's head? Or his shirt?

The Wizard of Gore

Courtesy Hollywood Book & Poster

In *The Wizard of Gore* (1970), a magician's bloody stage illusions become grisly realities hours after they have been performed on stage—with the magician's help, of course. By the way, there's that Lewisian grin again on the magician's face.

The Dawn of Romero

"Just because I'm showing somebody being disemboweled doesn't mean I have to get heavy with a message."
—George A. Romero*

*Cinefantastique, Vol. 9, No. 4, page 78.

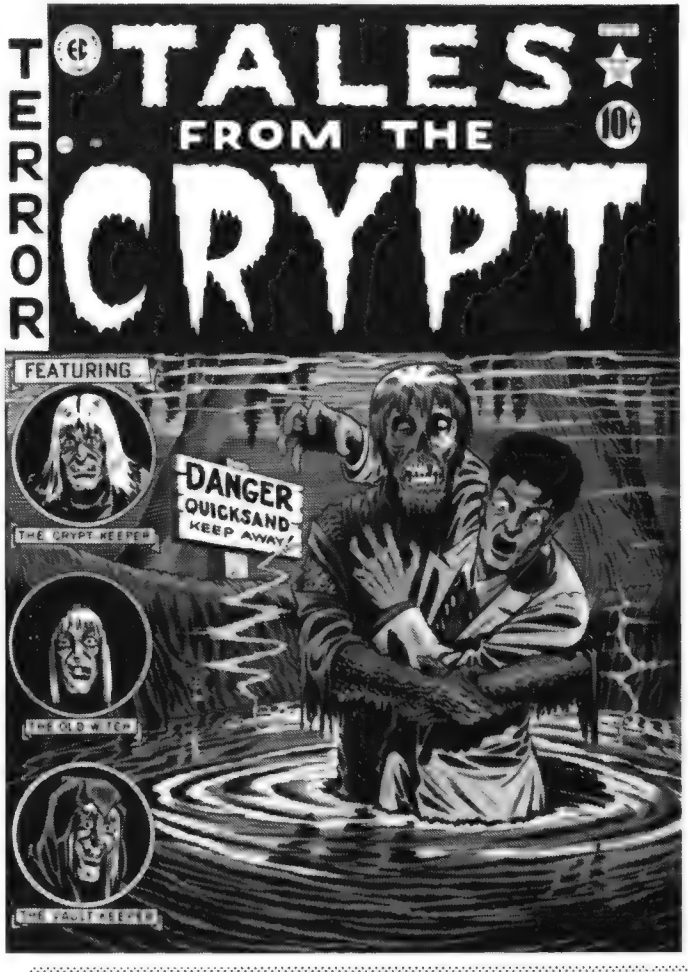
Chapter VI

EC Comics

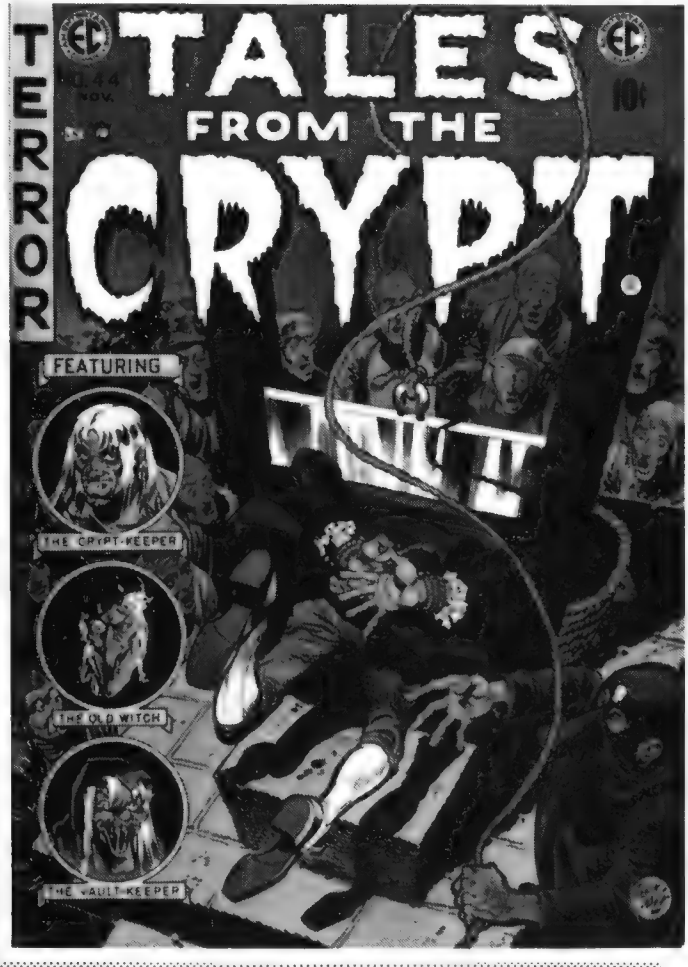
The release of George A. Romero's independently made *Night of the Living Dead* in 1968 ushered in the era of splatter cinema for real. It also ushered in the era of the filmed comic book, for in Romero's hands the two became one.

Romero perceived very early on in his career, as Herschell Lewis had before him, that if portrayed on the screen with unrelenting seriousness and unflinching realism, graphic violence began to produce a negative effect on an audience rather than a positive one. It seemed that when coupled with scenes of hideous violence stretched forty feet or more in width over a huge screen (and in stereophonic sound), *Grand Guignol*'s themes of heartlessness and unrelieved terror began to turn an audience off psychologically, not on. It became clear to him then that if splatter cinema was to continue to evolve as a significant sub-genre of the horror film, if realism itself was to continued to be employed and even expanded upon by directors as a powerful cinematic tool, then the negative factors implicit in splatter cinema had to be fashioned into positive ones. Lewis had somewhat achieved this feat due to the self-mocking amateurism of his films. Romero, in every way the superior craftsman, sought a different approach.

For many contemporary American fantasy writers and filmmakers whose adolescence was spent during the fifties, William M. Gaines's EC horror comics (*Tales From the Crypt*, *Vault of Horror*, etc.) remain not only



© 1981 William M. Gaines



© 1981 William M. Gaines

a vivid memory, but a potent creative influence. Certainly this is true of the 41-year-old Romero.

Published for a brief time during the late fifties, EC horror comics were eventually put out of business when their flamboyantly grisly content and frequently graphic scenes of gore began to arouse the ire of parents and the concern of the Comics Code Authority. Innocent enough by today's standards, EC horror comics were then considered to be exerting a harmful effect on the youth that read them. Juvenile delinquincy, then on the rise in America, was believed to be an alarming confirmation of this. A scapegoat was needed and everything from rock and roll to television to movies to poor old EC horror comics was blamed. Only EC horror comics succumbed, however. Now, a quarter of a century later, they are back. Not on the printed page, but on the big screen—in the form of splatter movies. And George A. Romero is the man chiefly responsible for their resurrection.

Born in the Bronx in 1940, George A. Romero is a bonafide member of the film generation, having begun making his first 8mm films while still in his teens. From there he went to Carnegie Mellon Institute to study art, design and theatre, graduating in 1961 with a B.A. degree. He has remained in Pittsburgh ever since, finding the area far more friendly to his independent style of filmmaking than the more corporate climes of Hollywood would appear to be.

Like Herschell Lewis, Romero be-

Night of the Living Dead

The Silent Majority finally goes on the march in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), George A. Romero's Agnew-era horror film debut.

gan his career in advertising. His Pittsburgh-based company, Latent Image, was geared to the production of industrial films and television commercials. In 1967, however, he teamed Latent Image with another Pittsburgh advertising firm, Hardman Associates, to produce a low budget, feature length horror film which he hoped would serve as his ticket into the film industry.

A number of ideas as well as titles (*The Flesh Eaters, Night of the Flesh Eaters, Night of Anubis*) were tossed about before Romero and his associates finally struck upon the ideal storyline and approach for their film, which would eventually be called *Night of the Living Dead*.

Significantly, the storyline Romero and his group came up with—a small band of humans, survivors of some mysterious plague which has animated the corpses of the dead, fight to save themselves from their blood drinking, flesh-eating attackers—borrowed liberally from Richard Matheson's novel *I Am Legend* without crediting it as source. Not until after the film's release, in fact, would Romero or his co-writer, John A. Russo, acknowledge their debt to Matheson's book. This policy of ripping off ideas or whole scenes from other people's books and films as a method of dispensing with plot in order to concentrate more readily on effects would become standard operating procedure for splatter moviemakers in the years to come. Romero's film can perhaps be excused for having helped to inaugurate the process if only because it remains the best "unofficial" version of Matheson's book yet filmed. The two official adaptations, *Last Man on Earth* (1964) and *The Omega Man* (1971), were artistic as well as commercial duds by comparison.

While a number of hands had an influence in the making of *Night of the Living Dead*, including producers Karl Hardman and Russell Streiner, each of whom played roles in the film, Romero's influence remains the most profound. He not only co-wrote the film, he directed, photographed, and edited it. And by his own admission, what emerged was exactly what he had intended—an EC horror comic on film. Even the absurdly lurid title was a throwback to those which had appeared in the comic books.

Romero spent little time in the film explaining either the genesis of the epidemic which has brought the dead to life or how it works. In keeping with the pace of EC horror comics, he merely unleashes the horrors and allows the action to begin first frame.

When the film was released, it caused a modest stir in the press. *Variety*'s reviewer, for example, was appalled not just by the film's graphic gore, but by what he called its "amateurism of the first order." Scenes in the film of grotesquely decaying zombies scooping up human entrails and devouring them elicited sharp attacks from local newspaper critics all across the country as well. Still, the film had a very successful initial engagement, playing almost exclusively at drive-ins, not just in the South, but all over. Then it found its real home: indoor theatres coast to coast began playing it Friday and Saturday nights as a midnight show. At one theatre in Boston, for example, *Night* played in this manner for two solid years. Ticket sales spiralled and the film became a cult favorite. It also began to garner good reviews, particularly in Europe, where the prestigious *Sight and Sound* magazine published by the British Film Institute cited it as one of the ten best films of the year. Romero was off and running. His first time at bat, he had struck a home run.

Disinclined despite many pressures to do a sequel right away, or even another horror film, Romero decided to abandon the EC horror comics/splatter approach altogether and opted for a straight love story, a romantic comedy called *There's Always Vanilla* (a.k.a. *The Affair*, 1971), which he also filmed in Pittsburgh. The film was a resounding financial flop—as well as an artistic one, Romero himself admits.

His next film, *Jack's Wife* (1972), another non-splatter film which had some occult overtones, was picked up for distribution by Jack (*The Blob*) Harris, who then re-cut the film and retitled it *Hungry Wives* for quick playoff. It too died at the box office.

With *The Crazies* (1973), Romero returned somewhat to the formula which had made his first film such a huge success. The plot—a chemical agent designed to produce madness that is being developed by the

U.S. Army as a weapon is accidentally dumped in a community's water supply—is straight live action comic book, recalling not only EC horror comics, but some of EC's other publications as well, including *Weird Fantasy* and *Weird Science*. Working with a bigger budget and using color for the first time, Romero kept the pace of the film just as frantic as *Night*'s had been. Technically much slicker than any of Romero's first three films, certainly moreso than *Night of the Living Dead*, *The Crazies* was nevertheless very unevenly acted (a failing even of Romero's later films) and, worse still, devoid of either cohesiveness or tension. It did receive wider distribution and promotion than either *There's Always Vanilla* or *Jack's Wife*, but it still lost money. Retitled *Code Name Trixie*, it was quickly sold to television where it now turns up from time to time on the late, late, late show.

With one hit behind him and three flops, Romero was no longer leading a charmed life. Financing was not so easily forthcoming, and so more and more he devoted himself to advertising work. The same year *The Crazies* was released and died, however, Romero's luck did take a turn for the better. He met and formed a partnership with a New York stockbroker named Richard Rubinstein. The association would eventually prove quite fortuitous.

Calling their new company the Laurel Group, Romero and Rubinstein proceeded to develop a series of sports-related documentaries, profiles of figures such as Reggie Jackson, which they succeeded in selling to network TV. Flush once again, Romero then decided to tackle another horror film, this time with Rubinstein acting as producer. It was to be a modern vampire story, again in the EC mold and again liberally laced with splatter. He called it *Martin*.

Martin was completed in 1976 but did not secure American distribution until two years later. In Europe, however, where it got widespread distribution strictly on the basis of Romero's name and the still potent reputation of his *Night of the Living Dead*, *Martin* netted Romero his best reviews, as well as his best box office, since *Night*.

Even before *Martin* had finally gained American distribution, however, Romero and Rubinstein had begun preparation on Laurel's next film, Romero's long-avoided sequel to *Night of the Living Dead*. Released in the spring of 1979, eleven years after the debut of *Night*, *Dawn of the Dead* became Romero's biggest box office hit ever, finally putting him over the top as the most successful as well as the most well known American filmmaker working outside the Hollywood system. He has determined to maintain that status. His most recent film, *Knightriders* (1981), another comic book-like adventure, was again made entirely in the Pittsburgh area.

As I wrote in the introduction to this book, Romero's splatter movies possess an underlying layer of social satire which separates his work from and makes it more interesting than that of most his contemporaries. This does not mean, however, that his films are any more serious. *Dawn of the Dead* does poke fun at our age of consumerism by pushing the implications of that consumerism to its grotesquely absurd limits. And *The Crazies* does reflect an image of America's Vietnam war experience on the homefront as viewed through a funhouse mirror. But that's all those films do. Despite their flamboyant grisliness, they remain but playful exercises. In no way can they be viewed as the political films many critics who have written about them would like them to be. And Romero would be the first to admit it. Robert Aldrich's *Twilight's Last Gleaming* (1977) is a political film disguised as a thriller. *Night of the Living Dead*, despite its engaging implications of what really would happen if Spiro Agnew's Silent Majority ever did go on the march, is not. Romero's films are live-action comic books, and the satire in them is precisely of the comic book variety. He did not coin the term "splatter cinema" to describe his own oeuvre for nothing. The term rings with a light-hearted absurdism that the term *gore film* simply does not. With *Dawn of the Dead* particularly, Romero turned the entire notion of realism in films inside out, rendering realism, through excess, patently unrealistic. This above all is what advances his work beyond that of Herschell Gordon Lewis.

Night of the Living Dead

© Continental/Courtesy, Hollywood Book & Poster

The ghouls descend upon the farmhouse in *Night of the Living Dead*.

© Continental/Courtesy Hollywood Book & Poster

Ben (Duane Jones), the doomed hero of Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, uses fire to stave off the marauding zombies. Here, the fire is getting a litte too close to home.

Night of the Living Dead

Romero's first time out success with *Night of the Living Dead* served as an inspiration for beginning filmmakers everywhere. If he could do it, so could they. And so *Night* imitations popped up everywhere, rivalling in number only those imitations which followed the more recent release of John Carpenter's even more successful independently made *Halloween*.

Two of *Night*'s spawns stand out particularly not only as a barometer of how much influence Romero's approach to making splatter movies was to have in the coming years, but as a study in contrasts as well. They are Wes Craven's *Last House on the Left* (1973) and Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1975).

Craven's first feature, written by himself and newcomer Sean (*Friday the 13th*) Cunningham, lifted its plot from Ingmar Bergman's lugubrious medieval tale of rape and revenge, *The Virgin Spring*. Shot in Connecticut, the film was updated, however, to the present day. A trio of degenerate thugs rape and murder a young girl in the woods. Later, the girl's parents entice the young thugs into their home for the express purpose of taking their revenge upon them. The father slaughters two of his victims with a chainsaw. The mother castrates the third with her teeth and allows him to bleed to death.

Devoid of Romero's comic book approach and saving sense of humor, *Last House on the Left*, shot in color and blown up from 16mm, has the gritty look of a newsreel and is a complete downer. Having served in combat during the Vietnam war, Craven wanted not only the explicit violence but the entire atmosphere of his film to be almost too painful for the audience to endure. He succeeded. The film is psychologically repulsive in a way that none of Romero's films are. Promoted heavily by its distributor, Hallmark Releasing, *Last House on the Left* did meet with some commercial success. But the reviews were scathing. Even the fanzines called it "foul-minded," "sick," and "loathsome." Craven learned from this lesson and adopted the Romero approach for his next splatter film, *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), which intermingled the grotesque with the absurd in true EC horror comics style.

Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1975), however, adopted the Romero approach right off and achieved by far the greater success of the two films—even garnering some good reviews. Loosely based on the true story of Wisconsin mass murderer Ed Gein, the cannibal-killer whose exploits also served as the basis for Robert Bloch's novel *Psycho*, *Chainsaw* is nowhere near as splatter-filled as its title would suggest. This is Hooper's cleverest ploy. The title alone has the audience cringing with anticipation before it even enters the theatre.

Instead of one cannibal-killer, Hooper offers four, three of them brothers, the fourth their blood-sucking skeleton of a grandfather who lives with them in an out of the way farmhouse that is covered inside with the bones and flesh of the quartet's past victims. An armchair located in the living room of the farmhouse, for example, is literally just that—which indicates just how closely Hooper was following in Romero's footsteps. Hooper's subsequent films also followed this approach. *Eaten Alive* (1976), *Salem's Lot* (made for television, 1980), and *The Funhouse* (1981) all bear the unmistakable stamp of the very same source which had given rise to the dawn of Romero himself: William M. Gaines's EC horror comics.

Romero's greatest weakness, apart from the generally low calibre of the acting in his films, is his inclination to write his own scripts, a failing that he shares with many filmmakers of his generation both in and out of the splatter field. He is a director of great imagination and remarkable ingenuity, as well as being a superb editor, but he lacks the writer's instincts for strong character development, cohesive plotting, and dialogue that is both representative of the characters who speak it and vital to the momentum of the plot itself.

Romero's best written film so far is *Night of the Living Dead*. Significantly, the screenplay of that film, though based on a story by Romero, was written by a professional writer, John A. Russo, who has since established a reputation in his own right as author of a number of well received though minor horror novels including *Midnight*, *The Majorettes*

and *Limb to Limb*.

Romero's weakness for writing his own scripts may be the result of something more than ego or carelessness, however. As I said before, he shares this flaw with many of today's younger directors, all of whom are a part of the same film generation to which Romero himself belongs. The cause of the problem may very well lie in the belief most members of this group hold that the director is the man or woman chiefly responsible for how a film looks, how it moves, and, above all, what it says; that he or she is the film's *auteur*. Undeniably this belief is valid. Its general acceptance, in fact, among not just film directors but critics too has helped to fashion an aesthetic focal point for the art of filmmaking that was badly needed. Still, it does have a negative aspect, for what it has done is to push many of today's young and even established directors into becoming excessively credit conscious. The urge to write as well as direct their own scripts so as to firmly establish authorship beyond all question has become of paramount importance to many of them, regardless of how the films themselves are affected. Romero is as much a victim of this urge as he is guilty of it.

Still, there is hope for him. His much publicized alliance with best-selling novelist Stephen King on a number of projects to be directed by Romero but written by King over the next decade suggests that he is not unaware of his limitations as a writer-director. On the surface, this pairing seems ideal, for King's own work (*Carrie*, *Salem's Lot*, *The Dead Zone*) is as heavily influenced by EC horror comics as Romero's is. King, an excellent storyteller, is superb at creating characters who breathe, which Romero is not. Likewise, whereas King's work often lacks originality and surprise, Romero's does not. Their teaming could indeed take Romero's unique brand of splatter cinema and push it that vital next step beyond.

The Splatter Movies of George A. Romero

Night of the Living Dead (1968)
An Image Ten Production (Continental Films)
B&W, 90 minutes
Producers: Russell Streiner, Karl Hardman
Director/Photographer/Editor: George A. Romero
Screenplay: John A. Russo
Production Designer: Vincent D. Survinski
Lighting Supervisior: Joseph Unitas
Special Effects: Regis Survinski, Tony Panatello
Cast: Judith O'Dea, Duane Jones, Karl Hardman, Russell Streiner, Keith Wayne, Judith Ridley, Marilyn Eastman, Kyra Schon

The Crazies (1973)
(a.k.a. *Code Name Trixie*)
A Lee Hessel Presentation
A Pittsburgh Films/Latent Image Production (Cambist Films)
Color, 104 minutes
Producer: Alvin C. Croft
Director/Photographer/Editor: George A. Romero
Screenplay: George A. Romero, based on an original script by Paul McCollough
Cast: Lane Carroll, W.G. MacMillan, Harold Wayne Jones, Lloyd Hollar, Richard Liberty

Martin (1978)
A Laurel Group Presentation (Libra Films)
Color/B&W, 95 minutes
Producer: Richard Rubinstein
Director/Writer/Editor: George A. Romero
Photographer: Michael Gornick
Music: Donald Rubinstein
Special Effects and Make-Up: Tom Savini
Cast: John Amplas, Lincoln Maazel, Christine Forrest, Elayne Nadeau, Tom Savini, Sarah Venable, Fran Middleton, Al Levitsky, George A. Romero

Dawn Of The Dead (1979)
A Laurel Group Presentation (United Films)
Color, 127 minutes
Producer: Richard Rubinstein
Director/Writer/Editor: George A. Romero
Photographer: Michael Gornick
Music: The Goblins with Dario Argento
Special Effects and Make-Up: Tom Savini
Cast: David Emge, Ken Foree, Scott H. Reiniger, Gaylen Ross

A haunting shot of the vampire youth (John Amplas) in *Martin* (1978), the first Romero/Rubinstein collaboration.

Martin

© 1977 Braddock Associates

Sexual psychopath, confused youth, or vampire? Probably a little of each, Romero seems to be telling us in his modern vampire tale *Martin*.

Martin

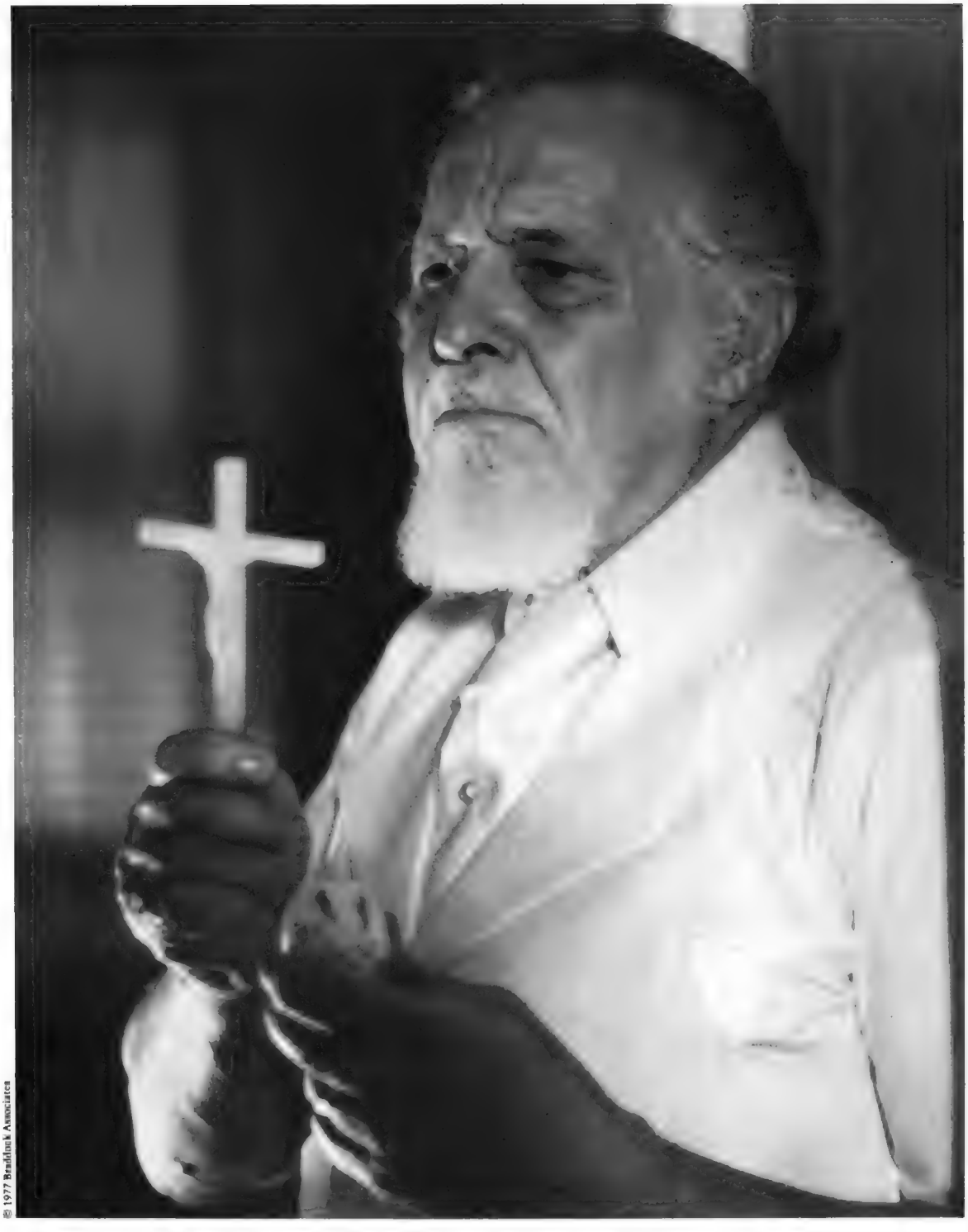
© 1977 Braddock Associates

Another victim of the vampire in *Martin*, the film which netted Romero his best reviews, as well as his best box-office, since *Night*.

Dawn of the Dead

© Dawn Associates, 1978/K. Kolbert

The dead finally rise once more in Romero's long-awaited sequel to his first film.


© 1977 Braddock Associates

The requisite cross is at last wielded against the vampire—by actor Lincoln Maazel.

Dawn of the Dead

Consumerism pushed to its grotesquely absurd limits in Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1979), the film that finally put him over the top as an established and sought after independent filmmaker.

Zombie

© The Jerry Gross Organization

Shades of Romero? Only on the surface. From *Zombie* (1980), directed by Lucio Fulci, Italy's reigning king of spaghetti-splatter.

Dawn of the Dead

© Dawn Associates/R. Kolbert

Romero's sense of the absurd is evidenced by this shot from *Dawn of the Dead* in which the heroine arms to the teeth in order to protect herself against a nun with a very bad habit—cannibalism.

Dawn of the Dead

© Dawn Associates, 1978/K. Kolbert

Special effects for *Dawn of the Dead*. A zombie's blood bag is wired to explode on cue.

The Hills Have Eyes

© The Blood Relations Company/Courtesy: Hollywood Book & Poster

Wes Craven successfully adopted the Romero approach for his second splatter movie, *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), the story of a family of crazed killers that terrorizes campers.

© New Line Cinema

Hard place to keep clean, huh? Dig the armchair in the background. It's literally just that. From Tobe Hooper's successfully EC-ish *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1975).

David Cronenberg

"*The Brood*, I've often described only half jokingly, as my version of *Kramer Vs. Kramer*."
—David Cronenberg
(in a conversation with the author)

Chapter VII

They Came From Within

The very *Guignol* films of Canada's David Cronenberg advanced the phenomenon of splatter cinema its logical next step forward. Through excess and the application of his EC horror comics style, George A. Romero had succeeded in winning a wider audience for his splatter movies by making the horrendously real on the screen seem absurdly unreal and at times even a bit comically absurd. Cronenberg reversed the process. Beginning with *They Came From Within* (a.k.a *The Parasite Murders* and *Shivers*, 1976), he transformed the absurdly unreal through a similar use of ghoulish excess into something which seemed grotesquely real indeed.

In *They Came From Within*, for example, a man leans over a balcony railing and vomits a penis-shaped parasite which has mysteriously invaded his body onto the umbrella of a female passerby below. In *The Brood* (1979), a psychologically disturbed woman named Nola (Samantha Eggar) succeeds in externalizing her inner rage so completely that this rage actually manifests itself as a developing fetus clinging to her thigh. And in *Scanners* (1981), a villainous telepath (Michael Ironside) causes another man's head to explode in a shower of blood and brains through the power of his own intense concentration. Unreal? Absurd? To be sure. But through his meticulous staging of these unreal events, Cronenberg, makes them seem horribly vivid and very real indeed. Real and deeply disturbing, the stuff of genuine nightmare.

© Trans-America

Uncontrollable violence and bizarre sexual behavior are the frightening results of a deadly parasitic disease in David Cronenberg's *They Came From Within* (1976).

Cronenberg admits that his own nightmares are very often where the ideas for his films come from. This is not surprising, for his films seem to work on the same level as both nightmares and dreams—the level of symbol and metaphor. On the surface, his films appear as straightforward horror stories. But that surface is often a mask for some deeper and more unsettling meaning.

In *The Brood*, Nola, the victim of a broken home and parental abuse during her own childhood, attempts to visit the same kind of treatment as an adult on her own daughter Candy (Cindy Hinds). Separated from her husband (Art Hindle), who has taken custody of the child, she wills

They Came From Within

© Trans-America/Courtesy Hollywood Book & Poster

Alan Migicovsky is about to make splatter movie history as the sexual parasite which has mysteriously invaded his body begins its bloody exit.

Rabid

her manifested inner demons, the brood, to claim revenge on them both. Her plan doesn't quite work, but then it doesn't entirely fail either. The ending of the film shows us that small sack-like bumps are beginning to swell up on Candy's arm as they once had on Nola's—tell-tale signs of another brood yet to come. Abused as a child, Candy is in all likelihood destined to become an abusing parent. The vicious circle draws closed; the victim becomes the victimizer.

Cronenberg's wry comment at the head of this chapter about *The Brood* being his version of *Kramer Vs. Kramer* is really quite apt. Both films are about the trauma of divorce and its impact on both parents and offspring alike. *The Brood* is a much darker study, however, for it also raises the spectre of child abuse. "It's basically a horror soap opera," Cronenberg has said. "It is very autobiographical and horrific, the story of my last few years. A not uncommon domestic situation in which all the paranoid fears of one of the partners are suddenly realized. More than realized. It is worrying that perhaps your wife, or your husband, is going mad and will kill your child, which you know is ridiculous, except finally you realize that is not only quite possible, but actually true beyond your wildest dreams."

The major difference between *The Brood* and *Kramer Vs. Kramer*, however, is that Cronenberg has chosen to tell his story of the perils of divorce and parental responsibility not in the manner of a social realist but in the manner of Edgar Allen Poe.

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In David Cronenberg's *Rabid* (1977), porno star Marilyn Chambers took time out from her X-rated romps to play a straight dramatic role, that of Rose, the victim of a sudden and unexpected motorcycle accident, whose life is saved by a doctor who uses a daring and experimental surgical technique. The operation has an unfortunate side effect—it leaves her with a ravenous appetite for blood. Soon she begins spreading the disease to others, passing it on to them in a unique and grisly way.

Born in Toronto in 1943, David Cronenberg was a late bloomer as far as today's generation of filmmakers go. Unlike George A. Romero, for example, he didn't take to the viewfinder until he was well into his twenties. Prior to that he'd thought of himself as a potential novelist. Cronenberg's father, a fairly well-known Canadian writer of pulp fiction and comic books, had been a strong influence on him, and so the progression seemed quite natural. But then the film bug bit.

Cronenberg had entered the University of Toronto in 1962 to major in science. Preferring the metaphor of science to the reality of it, however, he switched a year later to the

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The parasite makes an appearance.

university's English language and literature program. Awarded a grant from the Canadian Arts Council for his writings, he then spent a year traveling and writing in Europe, primarily in Copenhagen.

Returning to the university in 1966 to complete his degree studies, he discovered film instead and quickly proceeded to shoot his first, despite little knowledge of the craft of filmmaking itself. Called *Transfer*, the seven minute film told the story of a patient whose relationship with his psychiatrist becomes the only meaningful bond in his otherwise fractured life. Much later in his career, Cronenberg would deal with this same theme in *The Brood*.

A devotee of horror comics and movies since his childhood, Cronenberg continued in this vein with his next film, *From the Drain*, the story of a secret agent and a biological warfare expert who are done in by a slime creature that emerges from guess where to attack them both.

Graduating with a B.A. in English, history and philosophy, Cronenberg managed to win yet another grant from the Canadian Arts Council; this one for a film. With it, he wrote, produced, directed, edited and photographed a 65 minute film called *Stereo*, the plot of which, like his most recent film *Scanners*, deals with the perils of ESP. Shot in 35mm, *Stereo* was shown at a number of film festivals in Canada and abroad.

A year later, Cronenberg made another 65 minute film, *Crimes of the Future*, the story of a strange disease which causes people to bleed fluid from their noses and eyes. The disease has an even odder effect on those around the bleeders, however, for it compels them to try to devour the running liquid. Similar elements would again show up in Cronenberg's *Rabid*.

In 1970, Cronenberg received a third Arts Council grant and with it he returned to Europe, spending nine months in France writing and shooting several documentary fillers which he sold to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation upon his return. By this time, however, Cronenberg had become disenchanted with the low-budget, experimental film scene. His desire to make a film that would not only win wider distribution, but pro-

vide him with his first commercial success had become acute. The opportunity came in 1973 when he met Ivan Reitman, the producer-director of a low budget Canadian horror film, *Cannibal Girls* (1970), which had been released worldwide by American International with some success. Reitman's accomplishment now became Cronenberg's chief goal.

They Came From Within, the first Reitman-Cronenberg collaboration, took two years to get off the ground. Major financing was eventually secured from the Canadian Film Development Corporation, heretofore the sponsor of documentaries and educational short subjects. Cronenberg's script, which had a working title of *Orgy of the Blood Parasites*, was definitely neither. Nevertheless, the Corporation bankrolled the film, which was released in Canada by Cinepix under the title *The Parasite Murders* and then *Shivers*. It proved to be the financial success Cronenberg was looking for, achieving quite a bit of notoriety in the bargain. Canadian newspapers and magazines attacked its subject matter virulently. There was even a debate in the Houses of Parliament over the Corporation's having used (or mis-used) public funds to finance such a film. All of this was very good for business, however and *Shivers* was picked up for United States distribution by American International, who retitled it *They Came From Within* for its American release.

They Came From Within deals with an obsessive scientist (the first of many in Cronenberg's films) who creates a sexual parasite capable of stimulating the sexual appetite of its human hosts out of all control. The parasites grow in number, sweeping like a strain of venereal disease through a plush Montreal apartment complex, where they inhabit the bodies of many of the residents, young and old alike, turning them into sexual crazies. The film is heavily laden with splatter, but for audiences of the time, it was splatter of a very different kind from what they had been seeing in Romero's films for instance. When one of the malevolent parasites bursts from the stomach of actor Alan Migicovksy and latches onto the face of co-actor Joe Silver, who, while attempting to pull it off with a pair of pliers, turns his face into a raw, bleeding jelly, audiences were again pummelled into open-mouthed stillness, but this time by a new and even more astonishing addition to the *Grand Guignol* bag of tricks. Cronenberg's violent set piece had sprung forth wholly unexpected, catching the audience completely off-guard. His sexual parasite was no knife-wielding assassin or flesh-craving zombie whose bloodthirsty deeds could be anticipated, but a bizarre, almost comic creation, whose grisly explosions of violence permitted no foreshadowing at all. Thus a new and perhaps even more viscerally disturbing form of splatter cinema was born. Cronenberg has made it his special province ever since.

Cronenberg's brand of splatter cinema is a unique blend of the absurd and the physically revolting. His films revel in scenes detailing the utter corruption of the human body. As will become clear in the conversation with Mr. Cronenberg which follows, however, this emphasis is not altogether self-serving and gratuitous, for it directly relates to a very consistent theme in all of his films so far: the inability of human beings to come to terms with the fact of their own mortality; to face their fear of death.

Cronenberg's splatter movies are also distinctively marked by a blessed absence of endless cinematic quotes and hommages to other director's films which tend to glut the films of most of his contemporaries both in and out of the splatter field. If his films bear resemblance to the work of any director at all, it is perhaps that of French filmmaker Georges Franju, whose 1960 splatter classic *Les Yeux Sans Visage* (*Eyes Without a Face*) has much in common with all of Cronenberg's films so far.

Les Yeux Sans Visage deals with a brilliant plastic surgeon (Pierre Brasseur) whose beloved daughter (Edith Scob) is horribly disfigured in a car accident brought on by his own reckless driving. The surgeon, obsessed with the idea of restoring the girl's features, claims a number of female victims who resemble her and literally (as well as gruesomely) tries to graft their faces onto his daughter's own, but without success. In the end he too is mutilated—by the vicious dogs he uses to guard his estate.

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The victim becomes the victimizer in Cronenberg's *Rabid*.

One can see a definite link between Franju's film and Cronenberg's work as evidenced by these common threads: the brilliant doctor whose obsessions lead him to the practice of a kind of voodoo science which brings about his own end; the inability of the characters to face the fact of their own mortality; the comic book plot which is nevertheless staged with a relentlessly straight face; and the blend of the absurd with the physically revolting. I believe, however, that these similarities go beyond mere influence. They can instead be traced to the origins of splatter cinema itself on the stage of the *Théâtre du Grand Guignol* in Paris. *Les Yeux Sans Visage* is not only a clear cinematic descendant of France's gruesome theatrical tradition, but a sort of hymn to it. It is also a French film, one of the few splatter movies, in fact, ever to have been made in France due to that country's strict policy of censoring scenes of graphic violence on the screen. It is no coincidence, I think, that when Cronenberg's very French *Grand Guignol* thriller *They Came From Within* was first released in Canada, it enjoyed its greatest popularity among French-Canadian moviegoers, who even saw the film under a French title, *Frissons*. Obviously a familiar cord had been touched

By some strange and sinuous path, it seems, French-style *Grand Guignol*, now no longer a fixture in the country of its origin, had reached its full expression in the films of a remarkably kindred spirit in a country with a common national bond.

A Conversation With David Cronenberg

John McCarty: I've interpreted *The Brood* as really being about the effects of child abuse. Would you agree?

David Cronenberg: Oh yes, Definitely. *The Brood*, I've often described only half-jokingly, as my version of *Kramer Vs. Kramer*. It's sort of the nightmare side of that movie in

which everyone was relatively polite, reasonable, understanding and compassionate—something that very rarely happens in a situation like that really. It's about the character played by Samantha Eggar being abused by her mother and she, in turn, abusing her own child, psychologically as well as physically, with the understanding at the end that there's another generation yet to come.

JM: Your films have often been interpreted as political statements. I'm thinking specifically of *They Came From Within*, which some critics have seen as being a political movie on the level of Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, which kind of symbolized the sickness of McCarthyism rampant in America at the time it was made. Do you see your films this way?

DC: Well, I would say really that *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* could be interpreted politically—as the French tend to interpret anything they want to get excited about. For example, French critics tend to like left wing fascist politics even in their cinema. And, in fact, they were very heavy in their interpretation of *They Came From Within* as politics because they wanted to see the disease that spread throughout this extremely bourgeoise up-tight high-rise as sort of a disease of the middle classes and so on. And there's no denying that certain ideas do lend themselves to this kind of interpretation at times. But *Body Snatchers* I would never interpret politically—certainly when I was a kid I didn't. I prefer to interpret it on an emotional level as being about people who feel that they are outside of society for whatever reason and that have to conceal what they are from society at large because that society is becoming more monolithic and capable of pushing them more and more to the side if they expose themselves. In a sense though I suppose that's a political statement too. But I prefer to see it as sort of a portrait of the artist. You know the feeling that

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Frank (Art Hindle) is too late to save Ruth (Susan Hogan), who has been brutally murdered by the brood.

The Brood

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The psychologically disturbed Nola (Samantha Eggar) gives birth to one of her brood, a manifestation of her inner rage.

something about you gives you power and with it vulnerability. As you begin to find this power you have—this talent or insight—is not readily appreciated by society, you learn to cover it, you hide it, and yet, at the same time, you learn ways of expressing it. I think you can interpret *Body Snatchers* that way, as you can *They Came From Within*. *Scanners*, in a way, is even that much more upfront about that aspect of its narrative. It's about a group of people who have a very specific power which is misunderstood by society at large and even by itself at first. But gradually these people learn to pass as normal until they can figure out some way to make use of the potential this power has given them.

JM: I can't help but think you're describing yourself and the way many critics have received your films. True?

DC: I don't really think of my reception by the critics in quite those terms. I mean however good or bad they are as critics, they're also writers and they also go to the movies, and so I have more in common with them than I do with some people who don't understand writing, don't go to movies.

JM: How would you answer your critics then—the ones I mean who actually see some value in splatter movies and yet who still call *They Came From Within*, for example, or *Rabid*, loathesome or disgusting?

DC: Well, I must say I think such reactions are really very subjective. I mean the scenes that they're talking about I tend to think of as being either quite funny or exhilarating, or cathartic, or beautiful. I certainly understand what people mean when they say loathsome and disgusting, but it's very subjective. I can't argue with them. If someone says: "I find that repulsive." I don't say: "No, you don't." Undoubtably there are scenes in some of my films which even I feel are repulsive in some ways and yet this is all part of my general feelings toward not only horror films, but—as you call them—splatter films. They are films of confrontation. They aren't films of escape. And what it is that the audience is forced to confront are some very hard truths about the human condition, which have to do, in my films particularly, with the human body and the fact of aging and death and disease and the loss of people close to you. These things are inevitable and yet very hard to come to terms with. And they are things that horror/splatter films force you to confront.

JM: Do you think the *kinds* of things people are being forced to confront in horror films these days have changed much over the years? Or has the method of presenting them changed?

DC: I think the subject matter is incredibly constant. Not just in films, but in horror literature as well, which goes back to the beginning of time really. It's the basic material of the unconscious. It's style and fashion and censorship in both literature as well as film that have changed. I don't think that the basic stuff has changed. And it's kind of boring really because it would be much more exciting, I'm perfectly willing to admit, if the perponderance of splatter movies which we are now seeing were really a reflection of something current that's happening to society, but there's really nothing that new in them. Every age has its incredible frustrations and anxieties and feelings that the world is about to end, that apocalypse is now and so on. Gotterdamarung. Even the words are from other ages.

JM: You've been quoted as differentiating your splatter movies from George Romero's in this manner: his deal with childhood fears, yours deal with adult fears. Do you still believe that?

DC: Well, my comment there was really just a response to the fact that I feel my approach to horror, or splatter, is very different from Romero's. Once he had said that his films deal in childhood fears. The truth is that the fears of childhood and the fears of adulthood are basically the same at bottom. It's just that your perceptions of them change as you get older. When you're a child, you might be worrying about your pet. The pet gets run over, and for children—in North America fortunately—that's usually their first confrontation with death. Then when you become a parent, you worry about your own child and your friends, your parents, and yourself in the same manner you had once worried about your pet. Your perceptions of things change. But I think it's simplistic

The Brood

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Dr. Raglan (Oliver Reed), the head of the Somafree Institute where Nola is kept, is finally done in by the very creatures he helped to bring into being.

to say it's the fear of a dark room, for example, that works on you when you see a horror film. That's not even nearly close to what it's all about.

JM: Has horror literature always had a special appeal for you?

DC: Not more than other kinds. I've always been very eclectic. It's the same with films. I see everything. I know that there are a lot of young filmmakers today who are very obsessed with the horror and science-fiction films of their youth and who are constantly trying to remake them, or, more appropriately, re-live them. I've seen all those films too and have certainly been enchanted by them and scared by them, but I've also seen all the comedies, cop and war movies, and I have been influenced by them. It's just a matter of my own sensibility I suppose, that when I sit down to write something, what comes out is not just a regurgitation of what's gone in.

JM: True. I don't see constant references to this director and that film in your work.

DC: No. And it's not that I'm disrespectful—to Howard Hawks, shall we say. Oh, there is one slight reference to *Forbidden Planet* in *The Brood*. I have a school in the film called the Krell Street School. It just came to me when I was writing the script. Of course, I knew what it was from, but I didn't realize how particularly apropros it was until after I was shooting the movie because in a sense the plot of *Forbidden Planet* and the plot of *The Brood* are very similar; having to do with creatures from the ID, the unconscious being made manifest and so on. Such a reference couldn't have been completely accidental, of course. But in this case, it was not meant to be an hommage or an in-joke. It just came out. And it's about the only thing like that I've done in any of my films.

JM: Yes, it strikes me that if something is truly influential and it shows up in one's work, one is seldom conscious of it at the time.

DC: I agree. That's the truest type of influence. We've all seen what happens to guys like Peter Bogdanovich when they make a conscious effort to pay hommage. The same thing is happening to Brian DePalma. I mean, is it plagiarism or is it influence? It's the synthesis of the influence that's important, not just the mimicking of it, turning it around and having it appear exactly as it came in.

JM: There's a particular shot from *Rabid* that amuses me. It shows this creature, the one which causes people to become rabid, emerging from the main character's armpit; she in fact is the one who is spreading the disease. The creature reminded me of the head of a penis, and it amused me that you had chosen as your leading lady porno star Marliyn Chambers. Was that an in-joke?

DC: No, that whole concept was in the script long before Chambers came on the scene. But these sort of ironies do happen all the time. And I quite like them. Actually, I had originally wanted Sissy Spacek for the Chambers role. She was unknown at the time. I had seen *Badlands* and had admired her tremendously in it. But my producers were worried that she, in their words, had a Texas accent and too many freckles. They told me to forget it. Of course, two months later, she showed up on the cover of *Newsweek* magazine for being in *Carrie*, and they regretted having told me to forget it.

JM: Had you actually discussed the part with Spacek?

DC: No. I was just pushing for her. I was saying: "Look at this lady. She's going places!" But it all fell on deaf ears. Of course, I didn't even know if she would have been interested in playing the part. I never got as far as asking. The problem was we didn't have a very large budget and it was felt that it would really help us if we had some kind of name. But we couldn't afford the $50,000 or $100,000 it would have taken us to get a name. Then Ivan Reitman, one of the film's producers, heard that Marilyn Chambers was going to do a movie in New York with Rip Torn to be directed by Nicholas Ray, and that certainly sounded bizarre. Anyway it fell through and Marilyn was still looking to do a movie that wasn't an X. She was willing to work relatively cheaply to establish that she could, in fact, act. I hadn't seen any of her movies—still haven't except for *Rabid*, but I did think she was the most interesting of the porno stars. Ivan said, "Look, if she's terrible, we don't have to go with her,

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On the surface, Cronenberg's films appear as straightforward horror stories, but that surface is often a mask for some deeper and more unsettling meaning. Such is the case with *The Brood*, his Poe-like study of the perils of divorce and parental responsibility.

though it would be nice if she could act—it would be a good selling point." When I auditioned her, I was surprised that she really could act, and so I cast her. Simple as that.

JM: It's been reported that you've dropped the idea of doing your version of *Frankenstein*, which to me has always been the *Hamlet* of splatter. What attracted you to the idea of doing the film in the first place?

DC: Well, it seems that there are maybe three films that are the basic horror films. One is *Frankenstein*, one is *Dracula*, and the third is probably *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Those three are the closest to the "primal stuff." *Frankenstein* was first proposed to me—it was not my idea—because my films had a lot in common with *Frankenstein*, more certainly than with the other two. And it's true. A lot of my films—all of them, in fact, up to and including *Scanners*—have to do with creators, people who create monster children in some sense and who have to deal with their own creation once it comes back to them. And so I thought, maybe it might be illuminating and challenging to go back to that source and see what would happen if I tried to tell that story.

JM: I've always felt that if Mary Shelley's book were ever filmed as written, it would probably be unbearable to watch. Because of its theme of loneliness and responsibility—that man has been put on Earth by God and left to wander.

DC: That's right. Dr. Frankenstein is really the father of the creature and yet he rejects him. And what are the consequences of that? That as a theme interests me a great deal.

JM: Your most expensive film so far is *Scanners*. Has that made things easier for you?

DC: I first started *Scanners* about 18 months ago. I wrote a first draft of the script in three weeks, and we went into production right after that. I spent a lot of time during the shoot writing and re-writing the script. And even during post-production, we went back and re-shot some things. I prefer to write four or five drafts of a script before I shoot be-

cause it's much cheaper to try things out on paper. *Scanners* had a budget of about $4 million. But I can't say that made things easier, no.

JM: The Canadian film industry is really booming these days. How does it resemble Hollywood? Is it simply a reflection of Hollywood—the deal is the thing and so on?

DC: Yes, there's a lot of that. A lot of the real movie producers of Hollywood have left there so that the town has been taken over by accountants and agents; they're running the show now. And in Toronto, leaving out the agents, of which there are very few, there are a lot of accountants and lawyers who have gotten into the film business because the tax shelter laws encourage people to invest in movies. And so they've turned themselves overnight into producers, movie people. The problem is that they are more into the deal than they are into the film. They're not prepared once the film is through to take on the hassle of getting decent distribution, fighting off censors, and doing all the things you really have to do to see a film through. That's the bad side of it. On the other hand, there's also a lot of money around for people who really do make movies.

JM: You were certainly in the vanguard of the burgeoning Canadian film industry.

DC: Yeah, I certainly started before this latest wave.

JM: How does that industry look upon you now—as sort of a favorite son?

DC: (laughs) Not exactly! Well, actually, I must say that lately things have improved. Producers like me because my films have made money. They know that I'm known and that they can sell me in a package. That's my strength in the Canadian film industry. I'm half way to real respect, I suppose, though still not totally there at all.

The Splatter Movies of David Cronenberg

They Came From Within (1976)
(a.k.a. *The Parasite Murders, Shivers*)
A DAL-Reitman Production (A Trans-America Release)
Color, 94 minutes
Executive Producers: John Dunning, André Link, Alfred Pariser
Producer: Ivan Reitman
Director/Writer: David Cronenberg
Photographer: Robert Saad
Editor: Patrick Dodd
Make-Up: Joe Blasco
Music: Ivan Reitman
Cast: Paul Hampton, Joe Silver, Lynn Lowry, Alan Migocovsky, Susan Petrie, Barbara Steele, Ronald Mlodzik

Rabid (1977)
A Cinema Entertainment Enterprises Ltd. Production (New World Pictures Release)
Color, 91 minutes
Executive Producers: Ivan Reitman, André Link
Producer: John Dunning
Director/Writer: David Cronenberg
Photographer: René Verzier
Editor: Jean Lafleur
Make-Up: Joe Blasco, Byrd Holland
Music: Ivan Reitman
Cast: Marilyn Chambers, Frank Moore, Joe Silver, Howard Ryshpan, Patricia Gage, Susan Roman

The Brood (1979)
A New World Pictures Release
Color, 90 minutes
Executive Producers: Pierre David, Victor Solnicki
Producer: Claude Heroux
Director/Writer: David Cronenberg
Photographer: Mark Irwin
Editor: Allan Collins
Make-Up: Shonagh Jabour
Music: Howard Shore
Cast: Oliver Reed, Samantha Eggar, Art Hindle, Cindy Hinds, Nuala Fitzgerald, Henry Beckman, Susan Hogan, Bob Silverman

Scanners (1981)
An Avco-Embassy Release
Color, 104 minutes
Executive Producers: Pierre David, Victor Solnicki
Producer: Claude Heroux
Director/Writer: David Cronenberg
Photographer: Mark Irwin
Editor: Ron Sanders
Make-Up: Dick Smith, Tom Schwartz, Chris Walas, Stephen Dupuis
Music: Howard Shore
Cast: Stephen Lack, Jennifer O'Neill, Patrick McGoohan, Michael Ironside, Robert Silverman, Adam Ludwig

Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive

Georges Franju's 1960 splatter classic *Les Yeux Sans Visage*, the story of a surgeon's daughter (Edith Scob) who is horribly disfigured in a car accident, has much in common with Cronenberg's work.

Mainstream Splatter

Chapter VIII

It didn't take the major studios long to realize that splatter movies could mean potent box office indeed. The success of George A. Romero's miniscule-budgeted *Night of the Living Dead*, which had earned back its negative cost several dozen times, proved that. Imagine, producers then began asking themselves, what a full-blown Hollywood production backed by massive amounts of advertising and publicity and supported by widespread distribution might achieve? Scenes of graphic violence had been spreading by leaps and bounds throughout mainstream movies since the late sixties anyway, so why not take the plunge altogether and enter the splatter field with a vengeance? Thus, inevitably, Warner Brothers's *The Exorcist* was born.

Based by screenwriter William Peter Blatty on his own very successful 1971 novel of the same name, *The Exorcist* had its roots in a news story Blatty had read while a student at Georgetown University in 1949. The story was about a 14-year-old boy in nearby Maryland who, a suspected victim of demonic possession, had undergone a ritual exorcism by the Roman Catholic church in an effort to have the evil spirits driven out of him. The mythic overtones of the story—Satan's re-emergence into the modern world through the vehicle of an innocent young boy—continued to haunt Blatty for almost twenty years. By that time he had become a successful screenwriter (*A Shot in the Dark*, 1964; *What Did You Do in the War, Daddy!*, 1966). Instead of developing the story for the movies, however, he decided to treat it in the form of a novel.

Blatty changed the 14-year-old boy to a virginal 12-year-old girl, the daughter of a famous movie actress, and added two significant subplots, one dealing with a young priest, Father Karras, who is doubting his own faith, the other about an elderly priest, Father Merrin, who has performed exorcisms several times in the past. Otherwise he presented the facts of the '49 case just as he'd recorded them, occasionally mingling certain details with those from accounts of other cases of demonic possession and ritual exorcism he'd stumbled upon during his long period of researching the book.

Surprising as it may seem in view of how successful *The Exorcist* eventually proved to be both as a book and as a film, the novel itself was initially rejected by every major New York publisher Blatty submitted it to. By sheer coincidence, he subsequently managed to arouse the interest of a paperback house, Bantam Books, which acquired the book, then sold the hardcover rights to Harper and Row. The rest, of course, is history. The book went on to sell millions of copies in both hard- and soft-covers. The film made from it went on to become one of the five biggest money-makers in motion picture history. And splatter cinema, heretofore the exclusive domain of low budget independent and exploitation filmmakers, finally gained the respectability it required to become a potent box office force. It became absorbed into the Hollywood mainstream. The movies—and not just those of the horror genre—have not been the same since.

William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* is French-style *Grand Guignol* performed on an almost operatic scale, its salient themes of pain and terror hammered home to the audience with a technical brilliance no low budget splatter movie had been able to command so far. The film even introduced a new kind of superstar to the movie-going public, the make-up artist, a man whose impact on the art of moviemaking in the years to come would prove enormous. Dick Smith's amazing make-up and prosthetic effects for *The Exorcist* succeeded in catapulting him into a position of creative partnership with many of today's most influential filmmakers that no previous practitioner of the art of screen special effects had ever enjoyed before—with the possible exceptions of Lon Chaney, who was first and foremost an actor, not an effects man, and Willis (*King Kong*) O'Brien. More about this, however, in the next chapter.

Devoid of a sense of humor of any kind—even one as perverse as Herschell Lewis's films—*The Exorcist* is a profoundly depressing film indeed. Blatty's and Friedkin's protestations to the contrary, it is not a film about the "mysteries of faith and goodness" at all, but a technological nightmare whose sole aim is to astonish us with the sheer power and ver-

The Exorcist

© Warner Brothers, Inc

William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973) was a very posh splatter movie.

similitude of its supra-grisly special effect. At the end of the film, Father Karras (Jason Miller) reclaims his faith in the Christian ideal by sacrificing his own life to save that of the possessed child Regan (Linda Blair), but this single note of affirmation, quite an alien idea for a splatter movie incidentally, is quite literally lost in the torrent of monstrous sounds and hideous images which constitute the majority of *The Exorcist*'s two-hour-plus running time.

A great deal of pop psychologizing and speculation on the nature of good and evil and the reality of Satan's influence on the modern world did follow in the wake of the film's fabulously successful worldwide release, but still, Blatty and Friedkin are deluding themselves if they continue to believe that audiences ever really cared a damn about what *The Exorcist* meant. "How'd they *do* that?" was the question most filmgoers had on the edge of their quivering lips as they scurried from the theatre, and it's a question that has become of prime importance ever since. Audiences and film journals alike now no longer seem to care much what a film is about, *any* film; it's how that film was made, how its *effects* were achieved, that obsesses them. Some trace this all-consuming fascination with the mechanics of filmmaking to the influence of Stanley Kubrick's effects-heavy *2001: A Space Odyssey*. But I believe it really began with *The Exorcist*, that truly groundbreaking work of mainstream splatter cinema which succeeded in charting a new course for filmmakers (and critics) in the seventies and eighties by lifting splatter out of the cultural sub-basement and thrusting it into the limelight as an established and extremely vital form of filmmaking. With *The Exorcist*, the medium itself became the message. Max Maurey would indeed have been proud.

As I've already pointed out, splatter moviemakers frequently lift the plots for their films from other movies. This is done in order to get the problem of story solved as quickly as possible. The way is then free for them to concentrate on the more demanding challenge, that of creating new and more astonishing effects. *The Exorcist* inevitably spawned a host of imitations, none of them doing much to advance the cause and spectacle of mainstream splatter. One film which did take up the challenge in high style, however, was Harvey Bernhard's production of *The Omen*. Along with its sequel, *Damien—Omen II* (1978) and *The Final Conflict* (1981), *The Omen* series makes up the first splatter trilogy. Together, these three films succeeded in introducing a new concept to the bloody arena of splatter filmmaking—the device of the "creative death."

The Omen, directed by Richard Donner, was a taut, well-crafted little splatter movie that not only left room for a sequel, but invited one. After all, how could any self-respecting producer make a film about the birth of the Anti-Christ and then conclude his tale when the little devil was only seven-years-old? A sequel was surely in the cards. After counting the box-office receipts, however, producer Bernhard got so caught up in the excitement of the moment that he decided to make not one sequel, but *three*! These would trace the life of the son of Satan from puberty on into his teens right up to the moment of his big mid-life crisis, Armageddon. Fortunately prudence prevailed and he concluded the series with the second of these sequels, *The Final Conflict*.

The Omen had its faults, but it also had some virtues. Massive amounts of publicity were not heaped upon the film prior to its release; in fact, it almost sneaked its way into theatres. It turned out to be an agreeable surprise. While the film may have owed its existence to *The Exorcist*, it owed much of its style to the influence of that grand master of the occult film, Jacques Tourneur —particularly Tourneur's 1959 classic *Curse of the Demon*. The devilish storm which blows up out of nowhere to send Father Brennan (Patrick Troughton) to his "creative death," along with the eerie, studio-shot graveyard scene, appeared to have been lifted from Tourneur's special bag of tricks, but at least director Donner had taken these ideas and run with them rather than simply re-shoot them and call them his own. *Omen II* and *The Final Conflict* on the other hand borrow almost exclusively from *The Omen* itself. Bernhard obviously didn't

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Sharon (Kitty Winn) and Father Karras (Jason Miller) look on in horror as the words "Help Me" swell up on Regan's (Linda Blair) stomach in a scene from *The Exorcist*. Dick Smith's special make-up and prosthetic effects such as the one created for this scene catapulted him to a well-deserved fame as a cinema magician.

want to repeat the mistake John Boorman had made with *Exorcist II —The Heretic*; that is, to give audiences a completely different film. He opted instead to give them more of the same. In fact, *Omen II* and *The Final Conflict* are not so much like sequels as re-makes. The only thing which separates them is the individual sense of showmanship exhibited by each film's writer and director in coming up with new and more creative ways of luring Damien's various enemies to their deaths.

At the close of *The Omen*, little Damien, who must somehow worm his way into a sphere of great political influence if he is to fulfill his villainous destiny as set forth in the Book of Revelations, winds up hand-in-hand with the President of the United States. They are attending the funeral of Ambassador Thorn (Gregory Peck), Damien's presumed father, who had been shot down while attempting to murder Damien in a church. *Omen II* begins as Damien is shipped off to Chicago to live with his uncle (William Holden), who has forsaken politics in order to sit at the top of a huge financial empire which has its corporate fingers into everything from museums to industry. At this point, only two people in the world on the side of Good are aware of Damien's ancestry and birthright; the rest of the do-gooders have either been shot, stabbed, decapitated or thrown from high buildings. These last two are an exorcist named Buchenhagen, a hold-over from the first film, and a friendly archeologist—played, but for some reason not listed in the film's credits, by Leo McKern and Ian Hendry, respectively. They are immediately killed during the film's first two minutes, the initial casualties in a body count that by the conclusion of *The Final Conflict* reaches almost absurd proportions. When Damien's grandmother (Silvia Sidney) begins to suspect the boy of being more than a little unusual, she too is killed off when a malevolent raven encourages her to suffer a fatal heart attack. From here the scene shifts to the military school Damien is attending along with his cousin Mark, Holden's son by a previous marriage. At the school, Damien falls under the spell of a stiff-necked platoon leader, who is also a satanist, and who provides the means by which Damien finally learns of his ancestry and mission. Another of Damien's concealed benefactors is Paul Buher (Robert Foxworth), a top executive in the Thorn empire. By the end of the film, after Holden and several other obstacles have been put spectacularly out of

Sisters

the way, Buher sits on top, paving the way for Damien's ultimate takeover of the company and its vast resources. The time will then be ripe for Damien's bid to win the hearts and minds of the world's starving millions so that he can thrust them into enslavement and then debacle. Foxworth's plan, you see, is for Thorn Industries to go into the famine business, to blackmail nations for food instead of oil. Interestingly, this scenario is frighteningly workable. Unfortunately, the film fails to explore it in any depth.

In all three *Omen* films, unbelievable freakish "accidents" happen to just about everybody who meets Damien, let alone threatens him in any way. In *Omen II*, a doctor who stumbles upon evidence that Damien has a body chemistry similar to that of a jackal, is forever silenced when he is split in two as the result of an elevator accident that is so spectacularly intricate, not to mention noisy, that one begins to wonder if Damien's protectors aren't trying to call attention to him rather than keep his identity a secret. In the same film, another snoop has her eyes pecked out by the same raven which gave Ms. Sidney her heart attack, after which she then steps out in front of an oncoming truck and gets smashed into eternity. *Omen II*'s highpoint, however, remains the elevator accident in which the doctor is cut in two. This scene exists blatantly as an attempt to out-do the scene in *The Omen* where David Warner gets decapitated by a flying sheet of glass.

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Brian DePalma pays hommage to Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) in this scene from *Sisters* (1973).

Likewise, the death of the monk in *The Final Conflict* (he slips from the catwalk above a TV news set, tangles his foot in a rope, gets himself further entangled in a sheet of plastic, catches on fire, then sways back and forth across the news set until he is finally burnt to a crisp) exists patently as an attempt to out-do the elevator murder in *Omen II*. Every time a character in the *Omen* trilogy virtually breathes an ill word about Damien, the audience knows that that breath will be his or her last. "Now how do you suppose *this one* is going to get it?" is the response which then fills the theatre. And that response sums up very concisely what the *Omen* trilogy is really all about.

Of all mainstream American film directors who work within the splatter genre, Brian DePalma is perhaps the most gleefully imitative. Like Alfred Hitchcock, the man whose work he parrots with such gusto, he genuinely seems to enjoy the effects of manipulating an audience to the edge of its collective seat. Unlike

Sisters

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Margot Kidder embraces a dead Bill Finley as Jennifer Salt sleeps on in *Sisters*, Brian DePalma's first and best Hitchcock pastiche.

Hitchcock, however, he doesn't seem to know—or care to know—precisely how to go about achieving this effect wholly on his own.

I recall that when I first got my hands on a movie camera (at age 13), the films I then began turning out in my excitement all bore marked resemblances to films by Hitchcock and Hammer and everyone else whose work was having an impact on me at the time. This is quite a common experience among people who are bitten by the film bug at an early age—whether they eventually choose to go into a career in filmmaking or not. Later, however, when I found myself in film school (Boston University), I began making films that were, good or bad, my own. DePalma on the other hand did not go through this ritual period of mimicking. Like David Cronenberg, he was not bitten by the filmmaking bug until after he'd gone to college, and the early features which helped to launch his career, *Greetings* (1968) and *Hi Mom* (1969), very clearly reflect the cinema verité approach to filmmaking so favored by East Coast colleges and film schools at the time. Prior to *Greetings*, DePalma had made one feature-length Hitchcockian thriller, the little-known and rarer-seen *Murder á la Mod* (1967), which served to foreshadow the direction his work would take in the seventies and eighties. But it was with the release of *Sisters* (1973) that his flirtation with mimicking the work of Alfred Hitchcock began in full.

In a review of *Sisters* for *Cinefantastique* magazine at the time of the film's release, I wrote that it was the most insightful and deeply felt hommage to the art of Alfred Hitchcock that a devoted admirer of the master's work had yet produced. I still feel that way. *Sisters* incorporated elements from Hitchcock films as diverse as *Psycho*, *Rear Window* (1954) and *Spellbound* (1945) to be sure, but DePalma had run with those elements, twisting them to his own ends to achieve his own desired effects—something he has ceased trying to do since.

DePalma followed the highly successful *Sisters* with the amusing, cartoon-like *Phantom of the Paradise* (1974), which flopped. Since then he has devoted himself almost exclusively to making thrillers which rely heavily on techniques and even plot devices already tested and proven by Hitchcock in order to produce their own very similar thrills.

In both *Carrie* (1976) and *Dressed*

to Kill (1980), for instance, DePalma has his composer, Pino Donaggio, enhance each film's scarier moments by underscoring them with the same "screaming violins" composer Bernard Herrmann had created for *Psycho*. *Dressed to Kill* goes even further, cannibalizing its entire structure from *Psycho* and lifting whole sequences not only from that film, but from *Vertigo* (1958) and *Rear Window* as well. Obviously, this goes beyond mere hommage. It is, as David Cronenberg puts it, turning something around and having it appear exactly as it came in. It is what I and many other film fans like me, did when we first got our hands on a camera—though certainly on a far grander and much more accomplished scale. It is imitation. Mimicry.

DePalma doesn't just restrict himself to imitating Hitchcock though. His latest film *Blow Out* (1981), which deals with a movie sound effects man (John Travolta) who unwittingly records the sounds of a murder being committed, borrows in equal measure from Francis Ford Coppola's absorbing 1974 thriller about a professional wire-tapper (Gene Hackman) who overhears a murder being planned, *The Conversation*, and Michelangelo Antonioni's classic *Blow-Up* (1966) about a professional fashion photographer (David Hemmings) who unwittingly captures the details of a murder in progress on film. Even the title of DePalma's film recalls that of Antonioni's.

Neither is DePalma above lifting ideas from his own work and replaying them. Both *Carrie* and *Dressed to Kill* begin with long, erotically-charged sequences of a female (Sissy Spacek, Angie Dickinson) carressing her naked body with soap as she enjoys a shower, only to have her reverie suddenly broken by some real or imagined trauma. And both films end with the heroine (Amy Irving, Nancy Allen) sitting bolt upright in bed and screaming as she recalls the details of a nightmare which she and the audience had been convinced was real.

A major point in DePalma's favor, however, is that whether he's imitating Hitchcock's work or his own, he does succeed in doing honor to his source. *Dressed to Kill* may not be *Psycho*, but it is certainly a very skillfully made and entertaining copy. Likewise, the re-use of the shock ending of *Carrie* for the conclusion of *Dressed to Kill*. Yes, it's self-plagarism, but it is undeniably effective nevertheless—even a second time around.

All in all the work of Brian DePalma is a lot like costume jewelry. Knowing it's imitation may not lessen your enjoyment of it. But its net worth does remain open to question.

Twentieth Century-Fox's multi-million dollar production of *Alien* (1979) remains as of this writing the screen's reigning splatter epic. Though not as flamboyantly grisly as *Dawn of the Dead*, its combined elements of human, alien, and robot splatter make it a unique contribution to the genre.

This film, about a single-mindedly lethal creature that is brought onboard a space-age garbage scow so that it can methodically slaughter off the crew, has no pretensions to being about anything except its own grisly effects. It moves along at a breathtaking pace (once the alien shows up), derives its so-called plot from *The Thing* (1951), Mario Bava's *Planet of the Vampires* (1965), *It! The Terror From Beyond Space* (1958) and half a dozen other monster movies, and dispenses with logic as if it were the plague—which, to splatter movies, it often is. *Alien* is so derivative that it even lifts its major set piece, the infamous "chest burster" sequence, from a previous film: David Cronenberg's *They Came From Within*. It is splatter moviemaking at its most basic—imitative, empty-headed and eye-boggling.

The significance of *The Exorcist*, *The Omen Trilogy*, the films of Brian DePalma and *Alien*—mainstream movies all—is, of course, that they served to catapult splatter into a sphere of respectability. The huge financial and popular success of these films meant that major studios could no longer afford to look upon splatter as a purely bargain basement form of moviemaking. Only one final step remained to be taken in order to draw splatter even further into the cultural mainstream. Paramount took that step when, for a song, it picked up Sean Cunningham's low budget, independently made *Friday the 13th* and promoted it worldwide into a huge box office winner.

Dressed to Kill

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In *Dressed to Kill* (1980), DePalma has his composer, Pino Donaggio, underscore the film's scarier moments with the identical "screaming violins" composer Bernard Herrmann created for Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960).

Splatter's Make-Up Master: Tom Savini

"Lon Chaney, my idol, was incredibly versatile; he acted, did his own make-up and stunts. Hopefully, people will eventually come away thinking that way about me."
—Tom Savini
(in a conversation with the author)

Chapter IX

Film is a collaborative art, but the nature of that collaboration has seldom remained constant over the years. During the silent era, the director and the cameraman were predominantly responsible for a film's look, tone and even content. A powerful actor or actress like Douglas Fairbanks or Mary Pickford frequently shaped the films they appeared in as well, but, in the main, the silent film director and his cameraman held sway over the most memorable films of their date. D.W. Griffith and Billy Bitzer. F.W. Murnau and Charles Rosher. Rex Ingram and John F. Seitz. Clarence Brown and William Daniels. Maurice Tourneur and John van der Broek. These were teams to remember, for they were undeniably the chief architects of their films.

With the advent of the talkies, however, the writer began to assert himself, demanding because of the very nature of the talkies a more active role in the collaborative process. For a while, the writer even usurped the cameraman's position as the director's right-hand man. Frank Capra and Robert Riskin. John Ford and Dudley Nichols. The nature of the collaboration had changed in the thirties to occasionally emphasize director-writer teams.

In the forties, the cameraman's star rose once again. Sound had been tamed and the camera no longer had to be held in chains. Audiences had again gotten used to movies that actually *moved* and had developed a particular fondness for a gritty, atmospheric form of filmmaking critics have since dubbed *film noir*. The cameraman again became so important to the collaboration that the director often favored him over the writer as a teammate. Nowhere is this more evident than in the classic *Citizen Kane* (1941) at the end of which director Orson Welles chose to share his final credit not with his co-writer, Herman Manckiewicz, but with his cameraman, Gregg Toland.

The widespread acceptance among critics and industry-ites alike of the *auteur* theory during the late fifties and sixties catapulted the director alone into a preeminent position as the guiding light of film. The names Hitchcock, Fellini, Bergman and Truffaut reverberated everywhere. All but Hitchcock wrote their own screenplays as well and even Hitchcock did not collaborate with any single writer for any great length of time. Certainly he never constantly teamed with anyone. Writer John Michael Hayes came the closest, and even he only wrote four of the 16 films Hitchcock made during the fifties and sixties—*Rear Window*, *To Catch a Thief* (1955), *The Trouble With Harry* (1956) and *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1965).

All four of these giants did, however, team consistently with a special cameraman. Alfred Hitchcock with Robert Rurks. Federico Fellini with Giuseppe Rutunno. Ingmar Bergman with Sven Nykvist. Fraçois Truffaut with Nestor Almendros. But in the eyes of everyone, the director, not the director-cameraman team, still remained the dominant creative force in film during the *auteur* period of the fifties and sixties.

The nature of the collaboration shifted dramatically in the seventies when a new player was added to the front line creative team: the special effects man. Prior to the seventies, special effects men had served a vital technical function in the making of movies. They had created earthquakes. They had burned Atlanta. They had taken us to the enchanting land of Oz. But very few of them had ever risen above the status of "technician" to become a full creative partner along with the director, writer and cameraman in shaping the films they made. Willis O'Brien and later Ray Harryhausen were two of the very few.

Today, however, the special effects man, in tandem with the director, has assumed a considerable role in the filmmaking process, one that extends far beyond his bringing off that amazing trick or two. As so many of today's films—splatter movies in particular—are increasingly effects-oriented, the one-time technician has advanced to the position of unofficial co-director. The cameraman, the writer and even the star actor or actress have all slipped significantly into less powerful roles in the collaborative process.

The first sign of this change occurred in 1968 when Stanley Kubrick's technically awesome *2001* boosted special effects chief Douglas Trumbull into a position of creative eminence. Three years later, Trum-

Tom Savini

bull was directing and designing the effects for his own film, *Silent Running* (1971). The release of *The Exorcist* then caused a different kind of technician's stock to soar: the make-up man. Dick Smith's breathtaking orchestration of *The Exorcist*'s myriad of hideously powerful—and baffling—make-up and prosthetic effects turned him almost overnight into a star even though he had been doing make-up for over 20 years.

Smith's profound impact on film in the seventies encouraged a number of younger make-up enthusiasts like Rick Baker, Rob Bottin and Tom Savini to pursue similar careers as screen make-up masters. When they too achieved fame and subsequent creative clout for their ingenious work on films as diverse as the remake of *King Kong* (Baker, 1979), *Piranha* (Bottin, 1979) and *Dawn of the Dead* (Savini, 1979), another wave of young make-up men were prompted to enter the field, including Dick Smith's own son Dave, Chris Walas, and Carl Fullerton, to name but a few.

Unquestionably the relaxation of censorship rules pertaining to scenes of explicit gore and violence and other taboo subjects on the screen had much to do with the professional rise in stature of the special make-up effects technician during the seventies and now eighties. When the call for "More realism!" went out at the close of the sixties, someone inevitably had to emerge to meet that growing demand. Dick Smith and his colleagues were—luckily for them—in just the right place at just the right time. When *The Exorcist* was released with only an R rating, the walls of film censorship crumbled completely. All systems were suddenly go. And they have remained so ever since.

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Effects wizard Tom Savini in make-up as Morgan, the Black Knight, in George A. Romero's *Knightriders* (1981).

Splatter movies ultimately emerged because in a variety of forms they had been steadily chipping away at censorship restraints over the years. When those restraints were finally lifted, the special make-up effects technician was on hand to give splatter its final boost to maturity. And with that boost, the effects man himself suddenly became the cinema's hottest new *auteur*.

Dick Smith, Rick Baker, Rob Bottin and Tom Savini are currently the most well-known and busiest of today's movie make-up masters. In addition to *The Exorcist*, Smith's incredible versatility as a special make-up effects technician can be seen in such films as *The Godfather* (1972), *The Godfather II* (1975), *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Altered States* (1980) and David Cronenberg's *Scanners* (1981). Recently, Smith has made it known that he wants to steer away from projects that are overtly splatter-oriented if he can—as has Smith's protegé, Rick Baker, who began his career working alongside Smith on *The Exorcist*, then went on to solo with such splatter movies as AIP's *Squirm* (1976) and *The Incredible Melting Man* (1977(. At age 21, Rob Bottin, Rick Baker's own protegé, is the youngest of the quartet, though even at that tender age he has firmly established himself as a veteran in his field. His remarkable effects for films like *Piranha, Humanoids from the Deep* (1980), *The Fog* (1980) and especially *The Howling* have earned him a top reputation as a modern make-up master.

Of the four, however, 34-year-old Tom Savini is the one who is most closely identified with the splatter film form, a fact due in large part to his close association with splatter movie king-pin George A. Romero on such projects as *Martin* and *Dawn of the Dead*. Other Savini splatter movies include *Deathdream* (1972), *Deranged* (1973), *Friday the 13th*

(1980), *Maniac* (1981), *The Burning* (1981) and *Eyes of a Stranger* (1981). At present, Savini is at work on a wide variety of effects for the first George A. Romero/Stephen King collaboration, *Creepshow* (1982).

Contributing also to Savini's being typecast as the reigning king of splatter is the fact that he is the only one of the four to have been singled out (and vilified) by *Chicago Tribune* and PBS movie critic Gene Siskel in his campaign to have splatter movies, which he, Siskel, often refers to as "anti-independent women movies," driven from the nation's theatre screens. More about that controversy, however, in the next chapter of this book.

Completely self-taught in the art of theatrical and screen make-up, Tom Savini first got hooked on the idea of becoming a movie make-up master (as well as an actor and stuntman) when he saw James Cagney in *The Man of a Thousand Faces* (1957), the biography of silent film superstar Lon Chaney. "It was as if a bell had suddenly gone off," Savini told me. "Right then and there, I knew that this was what I wanted to do with my life." Chaney, who was not only a consummate make-up artist but a fine actor who performed many of his own stunts as well, has served as Savini's guiding inspiration ever since. Savini even named his own son Lon in honor of the late star.

Savini's big break came, of course, when George A. Romero signed him to create the virtual flood of astonishing, splatter-filled special effects for his *Dawn of the Dead*. There has been no looking back since. Today, he is in constant demand, much to Gene Siskel's obvious chargin, to lend his considerable skills as a special make-up effects technician to one new splatter movie after another.

To find out how Tom Savini feels about his sudden fame and prestige in the movie industry, and about his feelings toward splatter movies in general and his own notoriety as the form's grand master in particular, I decided to go straight to the source. I contacted Savini at his home in Pittsburgh, and here is what I found out.

A Conversation With Tom Savini

John McCarty: You were a combat photographer in Vietnam. What effect, if any, do you think that experience has had on your work?

Tom Savini: Well, I certainly saw a lot of the same things I create for movies. Only I saw them for real. I almost stepped on an arm once—a Viet Cong was shot by a buddy of mine and when he fell, a grenade he'd had primed under his armpit went off and just blew him to smithereens. I have a picture of him afterwards. But oddly enough, there is this distanced effect about being behind a camera. I felt safe—illogical as that may sound—because I was behind a camera and everything in front of the camera seemed like it was part of a movie. I saw a lot of grisly stuff all right, and my stuff in films has been pretty grisly. If I've got anything of a reputation at all, I'm probably notorious for how real my stuff looks . . . well, most of the time. I would say in that respect, the realism of my stuff, the grisliness, the *anatomical correctness* of it probably does come from that experience.

JM: When you're creating some super-splattery effect—for a film like *Maniac*, for instance, do you ever flash back on your Vietnam experience?

TS: Well, I can't say that when I'm doling out the blood that it doesn't cross my mind. But I don't want to give the impression that I do this work because of my war experience. Not at all. It would be easy to say: "Well, Savini just paints three-dimensional pictures of what he saw." But I don't. It's all in the script. Somebody writes this stuff. Only when it's a George Romero project do I ever get to go . . . foot loose and fancy free.

JM: Does the extent of your participation in the making of a film differ in any way from Rob Bottin's, for example, or Dick Smith's? As to when you're first brought in for consultation, I mean.

TS: It's in my contract that I get to direct the sequences that my effects appear in because, well, they *are* illusions after all, and they depend on certain surrounding shots to make the magic of the whole effect come through. I understand that on *The Howling*, Bottin was able to do his own lighting as well as set ups for his effects shots. Dick Smith, I'm sure, suggests surrounding shots to

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Fans liked the effects in *Maniac*, but the film itself was just sleaze. Savini would have preferred them to have been in a better showcase.

make his illusions work. For example, in *Altered States*, I'm sure there was only one way to shoot that transforming arm so that you wouldn't see the tubes and stuff. Obviously, for that effect, there was only one way to shoot it—Smith's way. However, in the bathroom scene where William Hurt looks in the mirror and his forehead swells, you don't get to see that happen as well. Dick Smith says he might just as well have put a solid appliance on Hurt—you know, already swollen out—because Hurt moved so quickly that you didn't get to see the effect. And for that reason, I try to get as many things in my contract as possible, like directing those sequences that my effects are in.

JM: What else is in your contract?

TS: I insist on having a single credit—"Special Make-Up Effects by Tom Savini"—at the beginning of the film so that my name doesn't get lost in the shuffle of credits at the end. And I get a videotaped copy of the finished film. What I've been doing on my last couple of films too is videotaping my effects so that I can see them right away. In *Friday the 13th*, for instance, there was one effect we had to do over again, call the actress back—it was the axe murder scene—because the tubing was showing. I was counting on the cameraman to make sure that everything was *kopasetic* as far as the tubing was concerned because I was down below the girl pumping up blood and couldn't see a damn thing. And the tubing showed up. Now I videotape beforehand to avoid that sort of thing.

JM: Are you ever called on to modify or do an alternate version of your effects in view of a potential television sale?

TS: Yes. We sometimes shoot a non-bloody—or not so bloody—version for television. But often there's no way to do that. No way to break the shot up or modify it. You either show it or you don't.

JM: What directors do you enjoy working with most?

TS: Well, George Romero I'd have to say first of all. He says I think like a director and so he lets me go when I want to do something. He lets me improvise; he lets me try something on my own, maybe even take over a scene. He asked me to look for a project of my own, and I've been reading a couple of titles that George owns. I can't say what they are because he doesn't want anybody to know, but one's an air-

plane disaster thing and another is kind of a zombie thing, but actually, I think that one is being done already by somebody else.* Also Sean Cunningham is a guy that I would love to work for anytime. He's totally organized. He does his homework. He comes on the set and he knows exactly what he wants to do and that saves a lot of time as well as pressure.

JM: How did you first meet George Romero?

TS: I was in high school here in Pittsburgh and George was out looking for young talent for a movie to be called *Whine of the Fawn*, and I was one of two people who got called in for a screen test, but the movie never got made. Then years later when he was making *Night of the Living Dead*, I was in college, a journalism major at Carnegie Mellon in downtown Pittsburgh, where his studio was. Anyway, I heard about the film, and I went over to see him. When the elevator opened on the floor where his office was, *bang*, he was standing there. To my surprise, he not only remembered me from that previous time—about six years earlier—but he remembered my name too. I told him I was doing make-up now and he said he'd like to see my stuff, maybe I could work with him on *Living Dead*. Well, I had enlisted in the army on the hold program and all of a sudden they called me and off I went, so I didn't get to work on the movie. About six years later, I was back in Pittsburgh again and I heard George was doing a film called *Martin*, a vampire film, so I went down to audition for the vampire, which turned out to be already cast. George was very busy, but I kept following him around with my portfolio from office to office, flipping through pages, and finally he hired me to do make-up. I also wound up doing the stunts as well and even playing a small part. Then, a little later, I was doing a play in North Carolina, and I got a telegram from George saying: "I've got another gig, call me." And that was *Dawn of the Dead*, and he told me to start thinking of ways to kill people. The rest, as they say, is history.

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Splattery effects from *Piranha* (1979) created by Rob Bottin, one of the busiest of today's movie make-up masters.

JM: Was the basic tone of the film—the flamboyantly grisly approach—established by Romero beforehand, or did a lot of it come out in improvisation during the shooting?

TS: George is terrifically organized. He put all the scenes in *Dawn of the Dead* down on index cards, so that when you spread them out, you had the whole movie spread out before you. And those scenes all overlapped, so that if you removed one, part of the puzzle was missing. That's by way of saying, yes, *Dawn of the Dead*'s grisliness was definitely in the script. We did improvise some

*This is probably *Return of the Living Dead*, currently being filmed in the Pittsburgh area by *Night* co-author John A. Russo. Russell Streiner and Karl Hardman, also of *Night*, are producing.

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Savini first got hooked on becoming a movie make-up master when he saw *The Man of a Thousand Faces* (1957), but Lon Chaney's make-ups were never like this.

of the stuff, but well over 50-percent of it was in George's script beforehand.

JM: Do you feel that the emphasis being placed on effects in today's movies—splatter movies and otherwise—as well as the passion people are developing to learn how they are done is serving to drown out any interest or concern with content?

TS: Yes, I think the effects people are becoming the stars of the films. What the critics say about films like *Friday the 13th*, that they don't have much plot or characterization, that they're an exercise in one death after another, is absolutely true. They're right. The special effects are the stars of those movies. I get tons of letters from people asking how those things are done—kids who want to get into screen make-up and effects and so on. And the fan magazines have certainly done their utmost to publicize the effects and the people who bring them off.

JM: Of course there's a double-edged sword to all of this. It's good for your career, but at the same time, people are no longer discussing what a film's about anymore. And consequently, many of them are not about anything. Does this bother you?

TS: I can't honestly say that it bothers me, no. But I will say that there was a magic alive in a lot of the older movies—the horror films, the swashbucklers, whatever—that we don't see today. Those films didn't have a lot of elaborate, graphic effects, and yet they were fabulous! You're going to find this hard to believe, but I personally feel that it's a lot smarter to leave things to a person's imagination, let him fill things in for himself. When your own mind completes something, it's much more valuable to you, I think.

JM: Does it bother you that you're being typed as a wizard of gore?

TS: Well, it's great to be famous for something. But seriously, it would bother me if I hadn't done anything else. But I have. I've acted—I've got a starring role in *Knightriders*—and I've done stunt work. Lon Chaney, my idol, was incredibly versatile; he acted, did his own make-up and stunts. Hopefully, people will eventually come away thinking that way about me.

JM: Tell me a bit about your theatre background—both at school and professionally.

TS: Well, I'll tell you when I lost my stage fright. I was in sixth grade, and they were having this bake sale, and they wanted me to go from classroom to classroom dressed as a girl, to advertise this bake sale and do this little skit. Now this was at the height of my insecurity as a child. In fifth grade, somebody told me that I had a big nose, and from that day on I was called things like "eagle-beak" and "banana-puss," stuff like that. All this harrassment about my looks gave me a horrible inferiority complex, and it led me to not even

Lon Chaney

dating in high school because I was so embarrassed about myself. Anyway, back in sixth grade, I pleaded with my teacher not to make me dress up for this bake sale, but she convinced me, and it turned out to be the greatest experience. I just got so lost in this little part. It was so much fun. From that day on, I had the bug. After I got back from Vietnam, I was stationed in North Carolina. I decided to stay there after I got out of the army because there were three theatres in the area and I became the make-up director for each of them. I wound up doing a show every two months for six years. I also played a lot of parts. I was Little Chap in *Stop the World*, Ben Franklin in *1776*, Happy in *Death of a Salesman*, King Arthur in *Camelot*, Thoreau in *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail*. I was playing romantic leads in *Cactus Flower*, Mortimer in *The Fantastiks*, Prince Philip in *The Lion in Winter*—a lot of fabulous parts. And, of course, I was also doing make-up—which, by the way, I designed for the mirror and not for the stage. Ben Franklin took me three hours a night to make-up, just to get the effect right even up close in the mirror. I was training myself for the movies even without knowing it because I was trying to get very realistic stuff.

JM: But you had gotten your feet wet before this with Bob Clark's *Deathdream* and *Deranged*. How did you come to do those two films.

TS: In between shows in North Carolina, I painted signs. One day I was delivering some signs to this bar, and there was this guy standing outside the bar apparently waiting for someone. He had a beard, a very interesting looking guy. And he turned out to be the art director for *Children Shouldn't Play With Dead Things*, which director Bob Clark was doing with writer Alan Ormsby. The guy said his name was Forrest Carpenter. He also told me he was gearing up to do another film with Clark to be called *The Night Andy Came Home*, which later went through a lot of titles before it finally became *Deathdream*. I happened to have my portfolio with me in my car, so I showed it to him and about a week or a month later, I was called, and that was my first movie. We shot *Deathdream* in Brooksville, Florida, near Tampa. And about a month after we finished *Deathdream*, I got a call from the same company to come and do a film called *Deranged*.

Museum of Modern Art/ Film Stills Archive

Tom Savini's idol: Lon Chaney, the Man of a Thousand Faces. Here, Chaney prepares for his role as a hunchback in *The Octave of Claudius*, which was later re-titled *A Blind Bargain* (1922).

JM: *Deranged* is based on the story of Ed Gein, the Wisconsin cannibal-killer whose exploits also provided the basis for *Psycho* as well as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.

TS: Yes, that's right. We shot *Deranged* in Canada, and while we were shooting it, I found out that Gein was still alive and had become a trustee in the penitentiary where he was imprisoned. I don't know if he's still alive, or if he saw the film, but

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The vampire (John Amplas) dines in courtesy of master chef Tom Savini.

he was when we shot it. And he was a trustee!

JM: Did you ever attempt any effects such as those you do in movies on the stage—á la *Grand Guignol*?

TS: Oh, yeah. I did a play by Robert Marasco called *Child's Play*. I played Raul Reese, a gym instructor in this school where some sort of mind possession is going on. Kids are hurting other kids and so on. At one point, I slice my hand open with a broken piece of glass that I've just pulled out of a wastebasket and the blood gushed right out on stage. I loved it because I could feel the audience rising up out of its seat to see how I did it.

JM: How did you do it?

TS: I did it right before their eyes, standing right out in the middle of the stage. What I did was, I put a baby's ear syringe filled with stage blood and a pre-cut piece of glass into the wastebasket. Then, during the scene, I threw a bottle into the wastebasket, then reached in and, palming the syringe, took the pre-cut piece of glass, lifted it up so that the stage lights gleamed off it and began slicing my hand, all the while pumping the syringe. Blood gushed all over the place, and the audience was just blown away. For *Macbeth*, I did a fairly realistic beheading, but on the whole, I haven't done an awful lot of gory effects on stage, no.

JM: Of the films you've worked on so far, which satisfies you the most?

TS: Well, *Dawn of the Dead*. How can I describe it? A constant flow of effects and stunts. I was all over the place. I liked *Friday the 13th* too for the same reason.

JM: Least favorite?

TS: Probably *Maniac* because it's, well, it's just *sleaze*. I was on a talk show in New York talking about the spirit and soul behind *Knightriders*, and a guy called up and asked me: "Where's the spirit soul behind *Maniac*?" People aren't too fond of *Maniac*. They like the effects, but I would have preferred them to have been in a better showcase.

JM: Do you think it's possible to determine a make-up artist's signature in his work?

TS: Sometimes, yes. In *Marathon Man* there was a scene where Olivier cuts this guy's throat, and I knew right away it was Dick Smith's work even though I hadn't known he'd been connected with the film.

JM: How did you know?

TS: Well, it's like the difference between fencing with a foil and fencing with a sabre. You just have to see the moves over and over again before you know that a blow coming to your head is actually coming to your shoulder. In seeing that particular effect, the way the blood bubbled up out of the artery, then came around, the cleanness of the appliance itself, I knew it had to be him. Dick Smith's the best. He's a scientist.

JM: Smith has intimated in print that some of the effects he's been

called upon to do in films like *Taxi Driver* and *The Sentinel* have bothered him a lot—to the extent that he now tries to avoid gorier assignments if he can.

TS: Yes, Rick Baker has said the same thing. He doesn't like to do the gore stuff anymore. Well, he doesn't need to. He's gone on to do some beautiful stuff—*King Kong* and Sidney the ape in *The Incredible Shrinking Woman*. Dick Smith doesn't need to do it anymore either. Of course, he did have a hand in the ending of *Scanners*—a great hand—but that was probably because he just wanted to try some new techniques of his. So, who's left? Me. Bottin. Chris Walas. Carl Fullerton. Now we've got most of the work. But I'd like to get out of it myself actually. Do more acting.

JM: What do you think the basic appeal of splatter movies is?

TS: Well, Bill Lustig, the director of *Maniac*, described that film as a kind of rollercoaster ride. You climb up to the peak, and you *know* you have to go down. If you didn't you'd be disappointed. That's the appeal, and it's also the danger. Now, when you don't show something, there's a percentage of the audience that's disappointed. The way an effect is done sometimes also creates an appeal. Take George Romero, for example. When he's going to show you some splatter, he often includes a little comic moment before or after it, so that the way the sequence is handled is not what you expected. You might be given a severed head, but it'll have a bag over it that reads "Shop at K-Mart." Little things like that are what George is into, and he's very much aware of it.

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"If I've got anything of a reputation at all, I'm probably notorious for how real my stuff looks," says Savini. Here a shot fired through a car windshield succeeds in blowing off the head of the driver.

JM: Do you see the splatter trend continuing or do you see the wrath of the censors coming down on it? Gene Siskel's crusade comes to mind.

TS: Well, I think the censors are going to have an effect, but I really think splatter will just naturally dwindle down. How many ways can you go on killing people? They'll probably stay alive until somebody spoofs them.* Like you knew that the Frankenstein and werewolf movies were no longer scaring anybody and that the genre was dying when they started making comedies out of them with Abbott and Costello. So, now I hear that they're planning a spoof called *Thursday the 12th*, and, who knows, if it's done well, that may be the death knell right there.

JM: William Friedkin offered you a shot at directing a film for him. What happened to that? How did it come about?

TS: Well, I was doing *The Burning*, and I got a call from William Friedkin, and I was beside myself with glee. He came on the phone and said he wanted to fly me out to the coast

*Ironically, the first splatter spoof came from the studio which had issued *Friday the 13th* itself, Paramount. Billed as "the world's first horror movie comedy," *Student Bodies* (1981) stars Richard Brando as a comic weirdo called The Breather. Mickey Rose directed.

The horribly disfigured killer Crospy (Lou David) masked (left) and then unmasked—as created by Tom Savini.

as soon as I could make it to talk about a long-term proposition between him, myself and Warner Brothers. Naturally, my heart fell down to my shoes. I had another commitment, a film called *Graduation* right away, so that was that for a while. He called me while I was on that film and told me to remember that as soon as it was over, I was commited to having this meeting with him in California. But when I was finished with *Graduation*, he was in Japan doing some lecturing. Anyway, we finally had our meeting—here, not on the coast, and he gave me a copy of a script he had in mind, to which I made some changes, all of which he liked. Then his attorney sent me a contract. We were about to finalize the deal, but then Friedkin decided he couldn't wait until September for me to finish *Creepshow*, and that was that.

JM: Is someone else set to direct it now?

TS: I don't think so. Not yet. Haven't read anything about it anyway. I can't mention the title because it's a property of Friedkin's and he really doesn't want anyone to know about it. It's a murder mystery, kind of a genre thing as far as the effects and stuff, but it's also a lot more. Something really different.

JM: Tell me about *Creepshow*. Have you met Stephen King?

TS: Oh, yeah. I met Stephen King during *Knightriders*. There's a character in that film named Steve, a lawyer, and one day we were on the set and George said to me: "Come on over, I want you to meet Steve." And this guy said: "Oh, I just got back from Cannes, and I saw *Maniac*, and I loved it. I love all your work. I've followed all of it. I've seen *Friday the 13th* and *Dawn of the Dead*, etc., etc." And I shook his hand and thanked him and sat down and George came over and said: "You know who that was?" And I said: "Yeah, that's the guy playing Steve." And he said: "No, that's Stephen King!" And I just groaned. But I've had a lot of meetings with him and George since, talking about all the effects in *Creepshow*. He's just a big kid. Like me. And like George.

JM: Is *Creepshow* going to be a mega-splatter movie or the ultimate EC horror comic on film?

TS: Well, there's some splatter in it. But mainly it's going to be really scary, with a lot of things in it that you haven't seen before. I'm getting to create all kinds of monsters and stuff. Stephen King and George were sitting in King's house in Maine one time, and they just decided to make a movie that would have everybody hiding under their theatre seats. That's *Creepshow*.

JM: If you could put your dream film together right now—with you taking part as actor, director, make-up artist and stuntman—what sort of film would that be? Splatter?

TS: No. To tell you the truth, what I'd really like to do is make the most spectacular version of *The Mark of Zorro* that people had ever seen.

The Splatter Controversy

Chapter X

Horror movies have always been somewhat controversial due to the overall grisly nature of their subject matter as well as their frequent reveling in morbid and even taboo themes. Inevitably, splatter cinema, that modern step-child of the horror film, would renew this controversy because of its graphic approach to dealing with many of these same themes.

In the vanguard of today's renewed discussion on the perils and pitfalls of showing graphic violence on the screen is *Chicago Tribune* film critic and co-star of the weekly PBS series *Sneak Previews*, Gene Siskel. Together with his *Sneak Previews* compatriot, *Chicago Sun-Times* and Pulitzer Prize-winning film critic Roger Ebert, Siskel has mounted an all-out campaign to run splatter movies out of town.

What triggered the present controversy was Paramount Pictures's acquisition of Sean Cunningham's low-budget shocker *Friday the 13th*, which Paramount then proceeded to ballyhoo into a major box office success. Both critics found the film to be purely exploitative in its mayhem and, worse still, extremely vicious in its attitudes towards women. They were appalled that a major studio such as Paramount would lower itself to releasing such a film. When *Friday* was followed in quick succession by a series of similar films—*He Knows You're Alone* (1980), *Silent Scream* (1980), *The Boogey Man* (1980), *I Spit on Your Grave* (1980), *Fade to Black* (1981)—Siskel and Ebert felt compelled to publicly raise a red flag.

In an open letter to Paramount's top executives, Siskel decried of that prestigious studio's having gotten behind such a blatantly violent and exploitative film as *Friday the 13th*. Paramount's execs obviously took Siskel's message to heart: within a year, the studio released two more low-budget splatter movies, a Canadian acquisition called *My Bloody Valentine* (1981) as well as the sequel to its controversial hit film of the summer before, *Friday the 13th—Part II* (1981). Siskel's protestations had fallen on deaf ears.

Piqued, the critic urged his readers who were sympathetic to his cause to boycott all Paramount releases, regardless of their content, as a gesture of unified protest. By this time, Roger Ebert too had joined in the angry fight.

The big push came when both critics devoted a special edition of their nationally-syndicated *Sneak Previews* program to a vitriolic assault on what they termed ". . . a disturbing new trend in today's movies." Subsequently the pair has appeared on NBC's *Today*, Metromedia's syndicated *Phil Donahue Show* and a host of other TV and radio programs in an effort to get their views across. As a result, they themselves have become media stars and the controversy they helped to spark has developed into a minor *cause celebre*.

Siskel and Ebert's anger with splatter cinema is directed not just at the form's basic blood and gore content, but, more significantly, at its, in their view, virulent attitude towards independent women. Splatter movies, they say, aim most of their violence at female characters who are sexually liberated and who act independently of men. Those female characters who are chaste and rather more dependent on the male of the species, they say, come through these films relatively unscathed. There's an underlying message here, they conclude, and it's not a very healthy one.

What the pair also finds offensive and sick about these films is the fact that when these independent women are finally dealt their hack and slash "comeuppance," the camera very often assumes the point of view of the killer, his heavy breathing filling the soundtrack as he bears down on his helpless birds of prey, transforming them into cringing, screaming victims.

Gene Siskel and Robert Ebert have built a strong case against splatter movies because on the surface everything they say about them is true. On the other hand, while I don't want to appear as an apologist for splatter movies (indeed many of them *are* junk!), I must confess to a certain unease with the evidence the pair has accumulated. It's entirely too superficial and a bit too specious as well. Not only that, the pair's attitudes from film to film are not always consistent.

For example, one of the pair's favorite shockers of the past few years, John Carpenter's *Halloween*, is a splatter movie which contains every element the pair seem to de-

Halloween

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Halloween, a splatter movie which contains every element anti-splatter crusaders Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert seem to despise so. And yet they remain staunch supporters of the film.

Piranha

© New World Pictures

Maniac

spise so. In that film, a group of teenaged girls are stalked by a knife-wielding phantom who has escaped from an insane asylum. During the course of the film, all the girls who might be described as sexually liberated are murdered. At the conclusion, only the virgin among the group (Jamie Lee Curtis) survives. Also, the film is loaded with sequences shot from the killer's point of view, most notably the film's long opening sequence which details the psycho's murder of his nude older sister, who has just had sex with her boyfriend, entirely from his own leering perspective.

The big question obviously is what sets this film apart in Siskel and Ebert's view from a film like *Friday the 13th*, a much gorier film admittedly, but one in which boys and girls alike are done in by the film's machete-wielding maniac, not just the independent females. And to further add to the confusion, there is this to consider: *Friday*'s killer, unlike *Halloween*'s, is a woman.

Siskel and Ebert say that what raises *Halloween* above its sleazier competition in their estimation is its occasional stylistic flourishes, such as cinematographer Sean Cundey's lighting techniques and director John Carpenter's sure hand at creating suspense. However, this does not strike me as a terribly meaningful difference, for all that it really implies is that it is more artistically valid to hack up independent female characters on screen so long as you do so with suspense and flair.

A liberal dose of the absurd, not just the degree of bloodshed, is what separates one kind of splatter movie from another. Demonstrating the two approaches are (above) the light-hearted and absurd *Piranha* (1979)—just get a load of those newspaper headlines!—and (below) *Maniac* (1981), a relentlessly depressing audience turn-off.

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The major fault I find with Siskel and Ebert's analysis of the splatter movie phenomenon, however, is that they just haven't looked deeply enough into it. They view splatter as "... a disturbing new trend." And yet the reader of this book surely realizes by now that the splatter genre is not new at all. It has been struggling to reach maturity a good many years, a process that began in the mid-fifties with the release of Hammer's *Curse of Frankenstein*. And splatter's roots in theatrical as

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Now this is really what you call getting it in the neck! From Ulli Lommel's *The Boogey Man* (1980), one of the many splatter films which followed in the wake of *Friday the 13th*'s unexpected box-office success.

well as film tradition extend even further back than that.

If, in fact, the freedom of the screen had not been restricted for almost forty years, the art of film, like the art of painting and literature before it, would in all likelihood already have had its flirtation with "realism" some time ago. Censorship only served to delay the inevitable appearance of splatter movies. All of which means that if Siskel and Ebert really want to run splatter movies out of town, all they need do is bite their tongues, sit back and wait a bit, for splatter cinema right now is passing through the September of its years. Even its chief practitioners, like Tom Savini, admit that splatter just naturally must dwindle down. Or at least change its shape.

Siskel and Ebert's other conclusions about the splatter movie phenomenon are no less superficial. Their idea that a certain group of splatter movies are guilty of harboring a virulent and unconcealed anti-feminist viewpoint is another good case in point. Yes, it's a provocative idea, and yes, on the surface it seems reasonable enough. But Siskel and Ebert are really giving many of these films much more credit for having a brain in their head—albeit a warped one—than they actually deserve. A film like *Friday the 13th*, for example, is not guilty of expressing an anti-feminist viewpoint, for it has no viewpoint at all. It's not *about* anything. *Friday* exists mainly as a showcase for its grisly and astonishing special effects. And that it contains so many varied effects is precisely why splatter fans were drawn to it in such large numbers.

The fact that so many of the female characters who get stalked and killed in these movies are independent women has less to do with any dark and sinister underlying message than it does with society's changing attitudes towards women as a whole. One must remember, splatter movies by their very nature are eclectic. Often there isn't a new idea or plot

device in them, for creativity is usually reserved for the special effects alone. The plot device of the "damsel in distress" is as old as the storytelling arts themselves. It has never been out of fashion. Splatter movies have merely taken this tired old theatrical and literary device and updated it with an eye to current attitudes. Surely if the movie heroine of today continued to behave like the movie heroine of yesteryear—Fay Wray, for example—she'd be laughed off the screen. I might also add that those occasional splatter movies which do evidence some intelligence and a viewpoint on something—Bob Clark's *Deathdream*, for instance, or the work of George A. Romero and David Cronenberg—either relegate the damsel in distress device to a distinctly subordinate role in the plot or dispense with it altogether.

Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert are not entirely wrong, however, when they draw attention to the fact that not all splatter movies are alike. They have merely chosen the wrong pair with which to make a comparison. *Friday the 13th* is certainly more demonstrative in its splatter than *Halloween* is, but otherwise there's scarcely a dime's worth of difference between the two films. Both are blatantly eclectic, full of implausibilities, completely empty-headed insofar as theme is concerned, wholly dependent on technique to keep the audience's attention, and, most importantly of all, firmly cast in the same lighthearted, EC horror comics mold that George A. Romero first introduced to the screen with his *Night of the Living Dead*. Despite their emphasis on realistic effects, both *Friday the 13th* and *Halloween* are patently unrealistic and absurd, and this absurdity is what takes the psychological sting out of them for audiences.

Films like *Last House on the Left* and the more recent *Maniac* on the other hand turn audiences off for precisely the opposite reason. They aren't absurd enough. *House* director Wes Craven himself admits that his film was too much of a downer because it was simply *too* grim. Likewise William Lustig's *Maniac*. It's not the film's splatter which turns most audiences off, it's the film's mixture of splatter with an oppressive mood of unrelenting grimness —*sleaze*, Tom Savini calls it. *Friday the 13th* and *Halloween* bring a comic book approach to the grisly events they portray. *Last House on the Left* and *Maniac* do not. And that, Gene and Roger, is the legitimate line of demarcation between most splatter movies.

Ironically, on an earlier *Sneak Previews* special edition dealing with bad movies which the show's two co-hosts happen to enjoy even if no one else does, Roger Ebert confessed to his having a special fondness for the profoundly depressing *Last House on the Left*. Gene Siskel is at least a little more consistent in his tastes. He seems to dislike most splatter movies indiscriminately.

The chief fear most critics seem to harbor about splatter movies is that they might eventually seduce audiences into craving the real thing on the screen: actual murders, no longer staged ones. Snuff films. This fear, however, is based on a false supposition: that the people who go to see these films do so purely because of the violence in them. But they don't. The real reason they go is to marvel at the grisly and astonishing special effects—to see if the effects in this *new* splatter movie out-do the effects in the last one they saw. Fans of a film like *Friday the 13th* perceive the splatter in it as simply an element of the special effects, nothing more, and they enjoy it on that level alone.

The real danger of splatter movies is not that they are seducing viewers into craving more violence on the screen, but that their appealing superficiality will eventually foster a generation of filmgoers that demands little else from movies except gaudier, more contrived melodramatics and increasingly more mind-boggling special effects. And if a film doesn't deliver these surface goods, that film will be deemed a failure.

Signs of this developing splatter mentality are already in evidence—even among filmgoers of my generation—as witness the hostile reception accorded by so many horror film fans in this country to Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980).

When it was announced that superstar director Stanley Kubrick was going to bring superstar novelist Stephen King's bulky, EC horror comics-influenced ghost story cum splatter

Fade to Black

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Eric Binford (Dennis Christopher) perfects his movie make-up skills in Vernon Zimmerman's splattery ode to movie monsters past and present, *Fade to Black* (1980).

The Shining

Jack Nicholson as the tormented Jack Torrance in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*, a film which most horror fans hated because it denied them the splattery effects and big scares they have come to demand.

best-seller *The Shining* to the world's movie screens, horror fans everywhere began gearing up for the event with an almost breathless sense of excitement. And what exactly was it that was being awaited so breathlessly? Well, it was thought, if Stanley *"2001"* Kubrick was making the film, *The Shining* would just have to be the *ultimate horror movie*, that's all!

Well, as it turned out, audiences who went to Kubrick's *The Shining* expecting to see a faithful translation of Stephen King's novel (or even another *Carrie*) were gravely disappointed, for Kubrick's film, in style and substance, owes less to King than to Henry James, Oliver Onions and many other Victorian-era practitioners of the novel of ghostly fear. Ironically, this was precisely the kind of switch we should have expected from this expatriate American (like James) filmmaker who has given us the screen's only stately science-fiction film so far. Set to the music of Richard Strauss, *2001: A Space Odyssey* went against everything audiences had previously held dear about sci-fi flicks, specifically their free-wheeling pulpiness. *The Shining* is a film of fear cut from the same mold.

Jack Nicholson stars as Jack Torrance, a former schoolteacher who hires on as winter caretaker of the remote Colorado mountain hotel, the Overlook, in order to gain the kind of solitude he feels he needs to write his "Great American Novel." Torrance is a dreamer, a loser, and an alcoholic to boot. There is much hostility and self-hatred in this man who just can't seem to get out of his own way long enough to make a success out of his life. Even before we learn that he dislocated his little boy's shoulder in a fit of drunken rage (though that's not how *he* explains the incident), we can see this hostility lurking in the caustically-edged comments he dishes out to his employer, Mr. Ullman (Barry Nelson), during his initial interview. Torrance, like the sexually repressed Miss Giddens in Henry James's novella *Turn of the Screw* and the bottled-up writer in Oliver Onions's *The Beckoning Fair One*, is a character whose flaws are primed for the right set of circumstances in which they could turn fatal. Solitude is the last thing the brooding Torrance needs. But he is accustomed to doing what's bad for him, then blaming the outcome on someone else—usually his wife Wendy (Shelley Duvall) or his son Danny (Danny Lloyd). So they go off together to the Overlook, a hotel with a history of unsavory happenings—the last caretaker, Ullman tells Torrance, murdered his family with an axe and then killed himself—and the classic ghost story situation is established: The doomed comes home at last. ("You were always the caretaker here," an Overlook apparition tells Torrance. How true.)

Complicating the plot is the fact that Torrance's son has "the shining," a special insight into the past and the future. As soon as Danny enters the Overlook, he is confronted by images of the previous caretaker's two murdered daughters. Immediately he knows that death ("red rum") is in the hotel, ready to be summoned by he who thirsts for it most . . . his father.

As in *2001*, *Paths of Glory* (1958), *Lolita* (1962) and *A Clockwork Orange* (1972), particularly among Kubrick's past work, we are here given a potentially volatile triangle in order to see how well its members work together. The answer is, usually, not very well. In *2001*, the triangle consisted of astronauts Poole and Bowman and a computer named HAL. Frictions surface among them while they travel on the spaceship Discovery: Poole is killed, HAL "goes mad" and must be dismantled, the journey goes awry due to human error. In *Paths of Glory*, three front-line soldiers accused of cowardice, two corrupt general staff members, and a lawyer-colonel (Kirk Douglas) with a passion for justice lock horns within the confines of World War I military court. The soldiers lose their lives, the generals their honor, and Douglas his case. In *Lolita*, there is the romantically obsessed Humbert Humbert (James Mason), the nymphet object of his erotically-charged affections (Sue Lyon), and the spoiler (Peter Sellers), each of whom comes to a bad end. And in *A Clockwork Orange*, a sterile society victimized by violent youth gangs, a government eager to restore order and keep power even if it has to alter the concept of free will in order to do

so, and a conscienceless punk named Alex (Malcolm McDowell) all strive for their own unmerited survival in a claustrophobic nightmare world of the future. Success, for all, is mixed.

In *The Shining*, Kubrick's triangle is the archetypical family group and it's ripe for destruction. Unlike the novel, which unfolds chiefly through Danny's eyes, Kubrick's film switches points of view, beginning with Danny's, moving on to Torrance's, and concluding with Wendy's. Wendy is the last to open her eyes to the truth about the situation: she can no longer pretend that her marriage to Jack has storybook potential (at one point, to show the nature of her yearnings, she is seen watching *Summer of '42* on television). The hotel elevators are metaphorically awash with blood, Torrance has an axe and is out to kill those whom he is convinced are trying to destroy him: his family, and the rotting corpses of the hotel's previous inhabitants who were similarly unlucky in life and love are finally revealed for her to see and learn from. She decides she and the boy must depart, leaving the self-destructive Torrance to consume himself alone.

Kubrick has discarded much of King's novel in order to concentrate on that aspect of it which interested him most; the story of the self-immolation of a human mind. As in the works of Henry James and Oliver Onions, the ghosts in Kubrick's story could be real, but more likely they have been *made real*, called into familiar shapes by Torrance himself in an effort to aid him in achieving what he desires most: his own destruction. This is precisely what happens in *Turn of the Screw* and *The Beckoning Fair One*, where the protagonists conjure up elements from their own troubled psyches and externalize them in the form of real people because they need these ghostly visitations to help feed their growing madness. When Torrance unburdens himself to Lloyd the bartender (Joe Turkel) in the Overlook's ornate restaurant and Lloyd provides all the right reassurances ("Whatever you say, Mr. Torrance."), Torrance is really reassuring himself. But he needs Lloyd because, as with everything else in his life, he needs to place responsibility elsewhere—even the responsibility for his own thoughts.

Later when Torrance enters the Overlook's mysterious Room 237, he finds a manifestation of his own subconscious attitude toward his marriage: an image that combines desire and eroticism with revulsion and fear. The manifestation pulls the attitude from his subconscious and releases it for real. His hostility zooms out of control. But again, in his mind, he is not the one responsible for its final vindicative release. Interestingly, in the novel, it is through Danny's eyes that we witness this manifestation, which just serves to illustrate how vastly different Kubrick's approach to the material is from Stephen King's. Having Danny witness and be attcked by the manifestation provides the reader with a pleasurable but momentary frisson. Kubrick aims instead for a subtler but more thematically consistent turn of the screw.

No small part of the success of Kubrick's film is due to Jack Nicholson's incredibly detailed performance as the self-destructive Torrance. One moment subdued, the next raving, Nicholson is the very incarnation of madness—the man who yearns for his own extinction. When he chops down a door to get to Duvall and shouts "Here's Johnny!" prior to bursting in for the kill, he reveals the face of lunacy itself—total disorientation masked in unnamable glee.

With *The Shining*, director Kubrick —aided considerably by his co-scenarist, the novelist Diane Johnson, his photographer John Alcott and his choice of Bela Bartok music—has served up the classiest screen ghost story since Roman Polanski's similarly-themed but more Kafkaesque *The Tenant* (1976). The fact that so many horror film fans were profoundly disappointed by it and continue to remain openly hostile to it is sad. But that reaction has less to do with what Stanley Kubrick set out to accomplish and, in fact, achieved—a genuinely Jamesian scareshow decked out in modern dress—than it does with his having left out the requisite bold and baffling special effects and big scares that the growing splatter mentality of today's fans increasingly demands.

Perhaps, Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert should be more concerned about that.

Stanley Kubrick

© Warner Brothers, Inc

Director Stanley Kubrick, creator of the screen's only stately science-fiction film so far, *2001: A Space Odyssey*. His *The Shining* was, alas, no splatter movie, but a film of fear cut from the same mold.

New Directions in Splatter

Chapter XI

Blood Beach

Well, we've come a long way in our chronicle of the evolution of splatter movies, a journey that has taken us from the stages of the *Théâtre du Grand Guignol* in Paris of the late 19th century all the way to the movie screen of the present day.

But what of splatter's future? Shall it just naturally dwindle down as Tom Savini suggests? Shall a renewed effort on the part of the censors among us to toughen screen restrictions on violence and sex result in splatter's scurrying once more underground? Or shall splatter cinema simply alter its shape by absorbing additional genres into its collective cinematic bloodstream in order to keep on regenerating itself? My guess is the latter.

Walter Hills *The Long Riders* (1980), for example, is a Western, but it is also very much a splatter movie. It borrows its plot—the Great Northfield Minnesota Raid of Jesse James and his boys—from at least a hundred other Westerns throughout film history and lifts technique from directors as varied as Sam Peckinpah, Robert Altman and John Ford so that it can dispense with these elements as quickly as possible and get down to the real business at hand: effects. These effects range from endless stretches of realistic violence which are so stylized that their realism eventually takes on an aura of unreality (a characteristic also of Hill's previous film, *The Warriors* [1979], to which *The Long Riders* owes an additional great debt) to gimmicks in casting. Hill has David, Keith and Robert Carradine, Stacy and James Keach, and Randy and Dennis Quaid portray the real-life Younger, James and Miller brothers who belonged to the historic James Gang as a unique audience come-on.

© The Jerry Gross Organization

The splatter beat goes on . . .

The Long Riders is not so much a Western as a live-action comic book version of one. In that respect, it's a lot like George A. Romero's EC comics-molded horror films and George Lucas's equally eclectic and effects-oriented live-action comic book, *Star Wars* (1977). *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* can be viewed as an outright splatter comedy for many of the same reasons.

Splatter cinema may very well be passing through the September of its years as a sub-genre of the horror film, but there are plenty of other genres out there on the cinematic horizon to which splatter can lend its demented qualities. And splatter cinema, it seems, is bent on astonishing us for a long, long time to come.

Humanoids from the Deep

© New World Pictures Corp

. . . and on.

A Splatter Movie Gore-Nucopia

Appendix

She-Devils on Wheels

What follows is a checklist of splatter movies that have been produced and which have earned some kind of distribution, however limited, somewhere in the world during the past two decades. The films of many countries are represented. Still, I make no pretense that this list is a definitive one. Inevitably some titles have fallen through the cracks of my research. I apologize therefore for any glaring omissions or errors.

Gore alone does not a splatter movie make and so each title was carefully selected on the basis of its having at least two qualities characteristic of the splatter genre as I have outlined them in Chapter I of this book.

Films which I have deemed notable because of their historic contribution to the development of splatter or because they offer something extra in the way of aesthetic interest or merit, I have denoted with an asterisk (*). The name which follows each title is that of the director of record. Titles are listed alphabetically by year.

Courtesy Hollywood Book & Poster

1963

*Blood Feast** (Herschell Gordon Lewis)

1964

Color Me Blood Red (Herschell Gordon Lewis)
Blood and Black Lace (Mario Bava)
Flesh Eaters, The (Jack Curtis)
*2000 Maniacs** (Herschell Gordon Lewis)

1965

Monster A-Go-Go (Bill Rebane, Herschell Gordon Lewis)

1966

Gruesome Twosome, The (Herschell Gordon Lewis)

Something Weird (Herschell Gordon Lewis)

1967

Berserk! (Jim O'Connelly)
How to Make a Doll (Herschell Gordon Lewis)
Taste of Blood, A (Herschell Gordon Lewis)
Undertaker and His Pals, The (David

Andy Warhol's Frankenstein

Bryanston Pictures Corp

C. Graham)

1968

*Night of the Living Dead** (George A. Romero)
*She-Devils on Wheels** (Herschell Gordon Lewis)

1969

Bloodthirsty Butchers, The (Andy Milligan)
Psycho Lover (Robert Vincent O'Neill)

1970

Beyond the Valley of the Dolls (Russ Meyer)
Flesh Feast (B.F. Grinter)
Horror of the Blood Monsters (Al Adamson)
House of Dark Shadows (Dan Curtis)
*Mark of the Devil** (Michael Armstrong)
Vampire Lovers, The (Roy Ward Baker)
Wizard of Gore, The (Herschell Gordon Lewis)

1971

Abominable Dr. Phibes, The (Robert Fuest)
Beast of the Yellow Night (Eddie Romero)
Blood and Lace (Philip Gilbert)
Cat O' Nine Tails, The (Dario Argento)
Corpse Grinders, The (Ted V. Mikels)
Daughters of Darkness (Harry Kumel)
El Topo (Alexandro Jodorowsky)
Gore Gore Girls, The (Herschell Gordon Lewis)
Guru, the Mad Monk (Andy Milligan)
*House That Dripped Blood, The** (Peter Dufell)
House That Screamed, The (Narcisco Ibañez)
Hunting Party, The (Don Medford)
I Drink Your Blood (David Durston)
I Eat Your Skin (Del Tenney)
Invasion of the Blood Farmers (Ed Adlum)
Next! (Luciano Martino)
Night of Dark Shadows (Dan Curtis)
Scars of Dracula, The (Roy Ward Baker)

1972

*Asylum** (Roy Ward Baker)
Baron Blood (Mario Bava)
Beware the Brethen (Robert Hartford-Davies)

© New Line Cinema

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre

Dawn of the Dead

© Dawn Associates, 1978/K. Kobert

Children Shouldn't Play With Dead Things (Bob Clark)
Countess Dracula (Peter Sasdy)
Creeping Flesh, The (Freddie Francis)
Dr. Phibes Rises Again (Robert Fuest)
Folks at the Red Wolf Inn (Bud Townsend)
Fright (Peter Collinson)
*Hands of the Ripper** (Peter Sasdy)
*Jonathan** (Hans V. Geissendorfer)
*Last House on the Left** (Wes Craven)
Nightcomers, The (Michael Winner)
Please Don't Eat My Mother (Carl Monson)
Possession of Joel Delaney, The (Waris Hussein)
Sweet Kill (Curtis Hanson)
*Tales From the Crypt** (Freddie Francis)
Twins of Evil (John Hough)
Vampire Circus (Robert Young)
Virgin Witch (Ray Austin)

1973

And Now the Screaming Starts (Roy Ward Baker)
Blind Dead, The (Armando De Ossorio)
Blood Orgy of the She-Devils (Ted V. Mikels)
Cannibal Girls (Ivan Reitman)
*Crazies, The** (George A. Romero)
Devil's Wedding Night, The (Paul Solvay)
Doctor Death, Seeker of Souls (Eddie Saeta)
Don't Look in the Basement (S.F. Brownrigg)
*Exorcist, The** (William Friedkin)
Flesh and Blood Show, The (Peter Walker)
Hex (Leo Garen)
Magnum Force (Ted Post)
*Raw Meat** (Gary Sherman)
Silent Night, Bloody Night (Theodore Gershuny)
*Sisters** (Brian DePalma)
Slaughter Hotel (Fernando DiLeo)
Ssssss! (Bernard L. Kowalski)
Tales That Witness Madness (Freddie Francis)
Theatre of Blood (Douglas Hickox)
Twitch of the Death Nerve (Mario Bava)
Wicked Wicked (Richard L. Bare)

1974

Abby (William Girdler)
*Andy Warhol's Frankenstein** (Paul Morrissey)

Halloween

Apartment on the 13th Floor (Eloy de la Iglesia)
Beyond the Door (Oliver Hellman)
Blood! (Andy Milligan)
*Blood for Dracula** (Paul Morrissey)
Blood Splattered Bride, The (Vincent Aranda)
*Deathdream** (Bob Clark)
Deranged (Jeff Gillen)
Frankenstein and the Monster From Hell (Terence Fisher)
I Dismember Mama (Paul Leder)
It's Alive (Larry Cohen)
*Le Grand Bouffe** (Marco Ferreri)
Mark of the Devil Part II (Adrian Hovan)
Mutations, The (Jack Cardiff)
*Phantom of the Paradise** (Brian DePalma)
Pink Flamingos (John Waters)
*Seizure** (Oliver Stone)
Tenderness of the Wolves (Ulli Lommel)
Thirsty Dead, The (Terry Becker)
Vampire's Night Orgy, The (Leon Klimorsky)
Welcome to Arrow Beach (Laurence Harvey)

1975

Barn of the Naked Dead (Gerald Corimer)
Breakfast at the Manchester Morgue (Jorge Grau)
*Death Race 2000** (Paul Bartel)
Devil's Rain, The (Robert Fuest)
Female Trouble (John Waters)
*From Beyond the Grave** (Kevin Connor)
Knife for the Ladies (Larry Spangler)
Love Me Deadly (Jacques La Certe)

© Compass International Pictures Corp

Mary, Mary, Bloody Mary (Juan Lopez Moctezuma)
*Monty Python and the Holy Grail** (Terry Gilliam, Terry Jones)
*Race With the Devil** (Jack Starret)
Rollerball (Norman Jewison)
*Texas Chainsaw Massacre, The** (Tobe Hooper)
Torso (Sergio Martino)
Vampyres (Joseph Larraz)

1976

Blood Bath (Joel M. Reed)
Carrie (Brian DePalma)
*Deep Red** (Dario Argento)
Demon Lover, The (Donald G. Jackson, Jerry Younlins)
Demon (Larry Cohen)
Devil Within Her, The (Peter Sasdy)
Dr. Tarr's Torture Garden (Juan Lopez Moctezuma)
Don't Open the Window (Jorge Grau)
*Eaten Alive** (Tobe Hooper)
Food of the Gods (Bert I. Gordon)
Hatchet for a Honeymooen (Mario Bava)
Horror Rises From the Tomb (Carlos

Maniac

© Analysis Film Releasing Corp

Aured)
House of Exorcism, The (Mario Bava)
Killer Snakes, The (Keiui Chi-Hung)
Legacy of Satan (Gerard Damiano)
Mansion of the Doomed (Michael Pataki)
Night of the Sorcerers, The (Armando De Ossorio)
*Omen, The** (Richard Donner)
*Squirm** (Jeff Lieberman)
Spasmo (Umberto Lenzi)
*They Came From Within** (David Cronenberg)
They're Coming to Get You (Sergio Martino)
To the Devil . . . a Daughter (Peter Sykes)

1977

Eraserhead (David Lynch)
*Hills Have Eyes, The** (Wes Craven)
Hollywood Meatcleaver Massacre, The (Evan Lee)
It's Alive II (Larry Cohen)
Jabberwocky (Terry Gilliam)
*Rabid** (David Cronenberg)
Ruby (Curtis Harrington)
Sentinel, The (Michael Winner)
*Suspiria** (Dario Argento)

1978

Chosen, The (Alberto De Martino)
Damien—Omen II (Don Taylor)
Death Sport (Henry Suso, Allan Arkush)
Fury, The (Brian DePalma)
*Halloween** (John Carpenter)
*Incredible Melting Man, The** (William Sachs)
Incredible Torture Show, The (Joel M. Reed)
Island of the Damned (Narcisco Ibañez)
Manitou, The (William Girdler)
*Martin** (George A. Romero)
Redeemer, The (Constantine S. Gochis)
Tempter, The (Alberto De Martino)

1979

*Alien** (Ridley Scott)
Beyond the Door II (Mario Bava)
*Brood, The** (David Cronenberg)
Dark, The (John "Bud" Cardos)
*Dawn of the Dead** (George A. Romero)
Legacy, The (Richard Marquand)
Phantasm (Don A. Coscarelli)
Piranha (Joe Dante)
Psychic, The (Lucio Fulci)
Tourist Trap (David Schmoeller)

1980

Boogey Man, The (Ulli Lommel)
Cathy's Curse (Eddy Matalon)
Children, The (Max Kalmanowicz)

Fade to Black

Death Ship (Alvin Rakoff)
Dressed to Kill (Brian DePalma)
Fade to Black (Vernon Zimmerman)
Fog, The (John Carpenter)
*Friday the 13th** (Sean Cunningham)
He Knows You're Alone (Armand Mastroianni)
Humanoids From the Deep (Barbara Peeters)
Island, The (Michael Ritchie)
I Spit on Your Grave (Meir Zarchi)
Long Riders, The (Walter Hill)
*Motel Hell** (Kevin Connor)
Prom Night (Paul Lynch)
Silent Scream (Denny Harris)
Terror Train (Roger Spottiswoode)
When the Screaming Stops (Armando De Ossorio)
Zombie (Lucio Fulci)

1981

*Alligator** (Lewis Teague)
American Werewolf in London, The (John Landis)
Blood Beach (Jeffrey Bloom)
Burning, The (Tony Maylam)
Caligula (Tito Brass)
Dead and Buried (Gary Sherman)
Deadly Blessing (Wes Craven)
Escape From New York (John Carpenter)
*Eyes of a Stranger** (Ken Wiederhorn)
Fear No Evil (Frank LaLoggia)
Final Conflict, The (Graham Baker)
Friday the 13th Part II (Steve Miner)
Funhouse, The (Tobe Hooper)
Halloween II (Rick Rosenthal)
*Hand, The** (Oliver Stone)
Happy Birthday to Me (J. Lee Thompson)
*Howling, The** (Joe Dante)

Campass International Pictures Corp.

Inferno (Dario Argento)
Maniac (William Lustig)
Mother's Day (Charles Kaufman)
Nesting, The (Armand Weston)
Prowler, The (Joseph Zito)
Scanners (David Cronenberg)
Scared to Death (William Malone)
Screamers (Dan T. Miller)
*Wolfen** (Michael Wadleigh)
X-Ray (Boaz Davidson)

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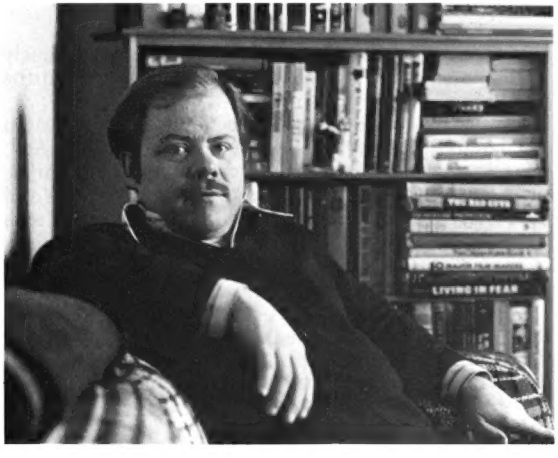
I would also like to share my sincere surprise that so many of the major studios whose films are discussed at length in this book elected not to have their films visually represented in it as well. The invitation was extended, however.

—John McCarty
September, 1981



Jeffrey A. Grove

The first movie John McCarty recalls seeing was a 1949 thriller called *The Window*, the story of a little boy who witnesses a murder, but because he is so prone to spinning fanciful stories, no one will believe him—except the killer. "I was 5," John says. "And that movie scared the pants off me. I could really identify with that kid." The experience marked the beginning of John's life-long fascination with films of suspense, terror, the supernatural and horror. *Splatter Movies*, John's probing analysis of what he calls "a bonafide sub-genre of the horror film," is a result of that fascination.

A graduate of Boston University's film school, John has written articles and reviews on films of horror and otherwise for publications as diverse as *Cinefantastique*, to which he is a regular contributor, *Filmmaker's Newsletter*, *Classic Images* and *Take One*. *Splatter Movies* is his second book. He is currently at work on a novel of the supernatural as well as a non-fiction study of the films and career of director Roman Polanski.

Biography

ISBN 0-938782-01-0

$8.95

They're called "trash." They're called "art." They're called contributing factors to a climate of violence in our society. They're called "sexist." But whatever they're called, there's no denying that they are a unique and powerful phenomenon in the annals of motion picture entertainment. They're **splatter movies**. And for good or for ill, they are changing the definition of realism in the movies forever.

In this lavishly illustrated, one-of-a-kind book, film critic John McCarty offers the first comprehensive look ever taken at this wildly demented sub-genre of the horror film—its roots and rewards, its artists and its exploiters, its successes and its failures, its impact on film censorship and its possible meaning to an age filled with almost as many gross absurdities as the products of the genre itself.

By breaking the last taboo of the screen—graphic violence—splatter movies are indeed having an inalterable effect on the entire direction of contemporary cinema, Mc-McCarty says. For that reason alone, he adds, perhaps we should pay them heed.

Splatter Movies does indeed pay heed. In thoroughly researched and absorbing style. It could be one of the most important film books of the year. As well as being one of the most talked about.

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